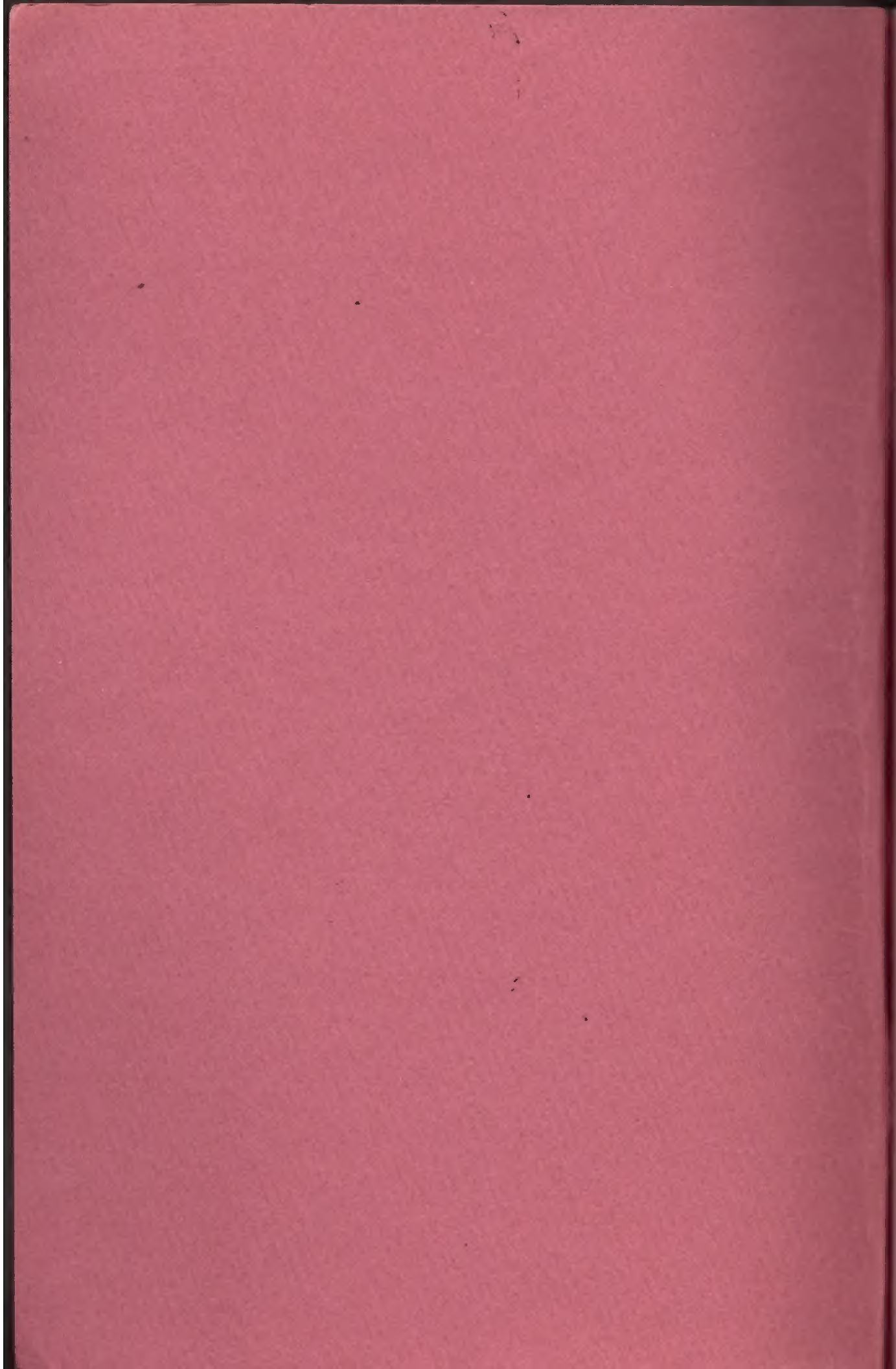


# KNIGHTBEAT

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## KNIGHTBEAT II

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### FROM THE EDITORS

We regret that a radical change beyond our control has affected the outcome of KNIGHTBEAT II. Vickey Brickle-Macky, whose work appeared in the first edition of this book, offered to prepare the manuscripts for printing--however, she independently re-edited her own stories, deleted several pages from another author's work, and arbitrarily left several of her own stories "to be continued."

Now, months after the publication of KNIGHTBEAT I, we have been unable to reestablish communication with Ms. Brickle-Macky. Attempts to reach her by phone and mail have been unfruitful. Had we known our publication would be mistreated and then sent so late to the printer that we were unable to affect the proper changes, we would have never employed her assistance--nor would we have accepted her work for publication.

We wish to publicly extend our apologies to Winifred McBeth for the injury forced on her manuscript in the first issue of this publication. We are reprinting her "Nick Knight" story in this volume, complete and intact. We are certain you will thoroughly enjoy it.

We also wish to invite our readers to complete the two stories by Ms. Brickle-Macky in KNIGHTBEAT I. It should be clearly understood, however, that should someone submit an interesting completion to either or both of these pieces, we will print the stories under the byline of both authors. In spite of the ignoble way our book was handled, we will maintain a sense of fairness and honor and give Ms. Brickle-Macky credit for her original concepts and characters.

Thank you for your unfailing support, tolerance, and understanding. Now, come join us in the darkness of the Knight...



## *Another Place and Time*

*by Denyse M. Bridger*

The dreams came, as they always did, breaths of disjointed, blood-tainted images. She felt the terror, a distant, abstract awareness that was part of her, but was not born within her. Within Gabrielle Sinclair was an unmistakable thrill of excitement--a macabre enjoyment of the fear that was growing all around her. She felt the reckless surge of abandonment that made her throw back her head, and laughter filled the night, hers, and his.

A shudder penetrated the madness and she was left wondering who he was. She gazed up, drowning in eyes so blue they filled her vision, and he smiled. That shift of expression, fleeting as it was, sent a tingle along her spine that made her arch toward him, her body seeking some point of contact with his. He laughed, delighted by the response, and suddenly, Gabrielle was swept into his arms.

The dream became a wild thing of lust and savagery as images blurred and aroused a hunger she couldn't define. His lips parted hers and demanded her soul. She gave it. The taste and scent of him filled her senses, stirring a passion that threatened to make her scream for fulfillment. And, still he teased her, his mouth searching out the most vulnerable places, plundering her secrets, revealing them to her with a wickedness that made him all the more terrifying.

When he refused to answer her broken pleas, she grew angry, and that, too, offered him a source of pleasure. He threw his head back and laughed as she turned furious eyes on him.

"Bastard!" she hissed.

"Take what you desire, Gabrielle!" he replied, matching her anger, but still smiling. "You can have anything you want, but only if you dare to claim it as your right."

Her eyes swept over the body lying beside her and she rose to her knees. She stared openly at him, feeling the swell of passion grow to an agony of exquisite need with each caressing shift of her gaze. Shaking hands reached out to touch the pale silk of platinum hair, then sensitive fingertips traced the mocking smile that tilted the corners of his mouth. She parted his lips with a gentle probe of one finger, and deliberately punctured the tip by brushing it against the razor-sharp edge of one extended fang. He licked the droplet of blood as she again traced the fullness of his bottom lip.

"I hate you," she murmured, leaning forward to straddle his hips. Her hands wandered freely over the smooth, cool chest, memorizing contours she knew better than her own body. Touching him was like a drug, addictive, senseless, exciting beyond anything she'd ever known in her life. She let another drop of blood drip from her finger; it pooled over his heart and she bent to lick at the scarlet stain. This time he reacted to her, and the tiny shiver brought a smile of deep satisfaction to her face. Gone was any trace of the innocence that had dominated so much of her spirit



years ago, pure hunger blazed from pale grey eyes. A hunger he had cultivated and fed for decades. A thousand years could pass and she'd still crave his touch with an insanity that made her despise herself, and him.

"Show me how you hate me, bitch," he snarled, hands tangling in the waves of auburn hair that fell forward when he pulled her down to him, eyes flashing. Amused, he let his hand encircle her throat, knowing she would sense no threat in the gesture.

She arched her neck, inviting without a word. His blue eyes grew dark and dangerous. She rose on her knees and bent forward until her lips brushed his, then allowed her tongue to invade the welcoming moisture of his mouth. Slender fingers drifted across her back, waking trails of fire that left her shuddering against him. She drew away from the bitter sweetness of his mouth and stared down at him again, her chest heaving with the effort to regain some control of her body's responses to him.

The hands at her waist shifted, finding the fullness of her breasts and she moaned softly as he brushed his thumbs across the hardened buds of her nipples. Gabrielle shook her head and slid back, pushing his hands away as she began to explore the pale, superbly defined body. When her mouth finished its teasing trek across his chest, and closed over him, she shuddered at the rise of his hips.

"Hate me, Gabrielle," he mocked, even now unable to resist the reminder that this erotic torture was something he allowed--not submitted to. Her head rose and she smiled, fangs gleaming in the silvery glow of muted moonlight that illuminated the elegant room. He pulled her back to him and rolled, covering her body with his as he took possession of her. When he bit into her throat in the same motion that he entered her body, she spasmed in a convulsive shiver of pain and ecstasy. He answered the response moments later when he drew back and she found the softness of his neck...

The shadows within the room gradually faded to pale grey as she watched for the approaching sunrise. The dreams had been more vivid last night than ever before. Gabrielle was frightened as she had never been in her life. They were always the same, except not. Subtle differences marked each dream. The one thing that never changed was **him**. The mysterious, unknown man who made love to her and woke a primitive craving that she had never found remotely a part of herself. The taste of blood, a hold-over from the dream, lingered in her mouth and she choked, retching painfully at that particular memory.

Sweat beaded her brow and she resisted the temptation to huddle into her bed and cry until there was only an exhausted blank where her mind should be. This wasn't a vision, she knew. It had the feel of an ancient memory, something that **was**, in fact, a reflection of her own distant past. His name remained a mystery, something beyond her reach. She had tried, shortly after the dreams started, to induce the subconscious part of her mind into asking his name in one of the dreams. That, too had proved to be futile. She could see every detail of the stunning, arrogant features,



feel every inch of the pale, flawless skin. Her body shivered with that stray thought, answering the ache that always filled her after one of the dreams.

*Hate me, Gabrielle*, the mocking, mildly contemptuous voice purred in her head.

"Hate you!" she whispered to the silent room. "I don't know you. I don't want to know you."

Frustrated and perplexed, she tossed aside the sheets that were tangled around her and rose. She headed for the shower, but stopped as she passed the mirror. Her eyes surveyed the woman looking back at her, vaguely disturbed by the sense of watching a stranger. Wide-set grey eyes were hard with an emotion she couldn't recognize, the mane of burnt auburn hair was in total disarray, streaming over ivory shoulders. Unconsciously, her gaze moved to the curve of her neck, insanely relieved to find the skin was clear and smooth. She touched a strand of the soft hair and twirled it around her fingers, reminded of the silkiness of his hair. The closely-cropped, silvery hair was fine and her fingertips tingled in reactive response to the recalled texture.

Irritated with herself, she peeled the wisp of nightgown from her body and dropped the sweat-damp garment into a heap on the floor. She walked to the shower stall and stepped inside, deliberately chilling the cascade of water in an effort to escape the flush that crept over her when his face drifted before her.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Gabby, wake up for Christ's sake!" Jared snapped impatiently. "We're supposed to be ready to meet the Carlton's in less than an hour, and you're drifting off in one of your visionary dazes."

"Jared, I'm not in the mood for your bullshit, so just stay off my case," she retorted. The anger was out of character, and out of place, she realized instantly. He was looking at her like he'd never seen her before. "I'm sorry," she murmured, her eyes avoiding his too direct stare. "I didn't get much sleep last night. I guess it's making me jumpy."

Jared didn't offer comment. She'd been getting more and more distant over the past few months, and there was an edge coming into the smoky grey eyes that warned him away more effectively than any of her words might have. There'd been a time when he thought she felt about him the way he did about her. Now, he wasn't even certain of his own feelings. Gabby's were a complete mystery. She didn't invite any man close, something that had been the cause of a great deal of speculation at one time. Now, it was an accepted fact, something no one talked openly about.

"We'll have lunch after this meeting," he suggested quietly. "Are you planning to go to work afterward, or would you rather go home?"

"I'd just as soon not have to go back to the house," she replied with an uneasy shiver. "This will either work, or not, so it's not going to take long." She looked away and her eyes focussed on a rooftop in the distance. She was never comfortable with these things, people's hopes hanging on her ability to offer them a ray of light in the darkness of losses they weren't



prepared to deal with. Gabrielle was considered a gifted psychic by many, and a flake by vastly more. She owned a lucrative advertising agency, and tried to shy away from the publicity that accompanied her professional successes. The first time she'd saved a life by insisting there was danger no one else saw, she'd discovered that her 'gift' was anything but; it fell more easily into the disdained category of a curse. Yet, she hadn't been able to refuse the people who sometimes sought her out to help them.

Jared Langdon had been one of the first ones to find her. He was a private detective, and his case then had been personal. When the police had suggested he talk with her, he'd been less than happy to learn what it was that made her an option he should consider. In spite of the initial antagonism between them, she'd eventually helped him find his kidnapped sister. He'd stubbornly remained a bonafide skeptic, until that terrible moment when his fifteen-year-old sister, Karin, had been dredged from the river--exactly where Gabrielle had told him she'd be found.

After Karin's funeral, Jared had become friend, bodyguard, and surrogate big brother. Later, he'd also become her most trusted aide, and could run the Sheraton Corporation with the same ease and effectiveness that Gabrielle, herself, did. Gabrielle knew he wanted a dramatically different kind of relationship with her, but she wasn't able to offer him more than was presently between them. She'd never known why, though in recent months, she'd begun to suspect.

From the time she was a child, Gabrielle had been old. The psychic ability that separated her from other children had played a part, but there was always the strong sense of another lifetime. Another time and place where she had lived, but had never truly died--at least not in the way that most people did. The violent dreams had been a terror to the little girl, showing her a vision of the woman she was today in the mirror--and the horror-stricken face distorted with flames as she burned, tied to a stake while people leered and applauded with agony.

A face she'd never noticed before suddenly became clear through the smoke and terror of her memory, and she choked back a whimper of fear when he shook his head and bowed to her. A flicker of silver was all that was visible as he vanished into the darkness, disappearing into the concealing cloak of night.

"Gabby!"

There was sincere concern in Jared's fear-sharpened voice, and he shook her out of the stupor that had made her cry out so violently. She was ghostly pale and trembling beneath his hands.

"We're calling this off," he decided when she finally slumped back in the chair and started to breathe deeply, slowly easing the gasping quality of the action.

"We can't," she eventually whispered. "I promised I'd help them."

"Gabby."

She ignored the warning in the tone and looked up at him. "I gave them my word, Jared."

He'd heard that steely note a thousand times in the past few years, knew better than to argue with her. He nodded, bit back the irrational,



furious string of words he wanted to fling at her, and turned his back to watched the driveway from the window.

"What happened, Gabrielle?"

She started, surprised by the use of her proper name. Jared rarely called her anything but 'Gabby', the fact that he did so now was a very clear indicator of his annoyance.

"A dream," she told him, feeling the vagueness of the reply. "Something from my childhood. It's not important, Jared. Really. I'd just never seen it quite like that before."

"You were terrified, sweetheart," he reminded her gently. "I don't always understand this stuff, Gabby, but that doesn't mean you have to face any of it alone."

"I know that," she said with a warm smile. "But there is, in this instance, nothing to 'face.' I have lived with strange memories all my life. I'm used to it," she added with a light laugh, trying desperately to shrug off the horror that still gripped her insides. He'd been there! Wherever there was...

\*\*\*\*\*

The day had been painfully long for Gabrielle, the Carltons' having been excessively demanding in their need for information about their son's disappearance. Explaining that paranormal psychology was anything but an exact science had only further infuriated them, rather than eased their doubts. She had been able to see nothing, even with the boy's belongings in her possession.

Despite the ridiculousness of the emotion, Gabrielle felt guilty for her failure to help them. Part of her couldn't escape the certainty that had she been less shaken by her own ghosts, she might have been able to glean something that could offer them hope for their son's well-being. The only face that filled her mind and refused to release her was the enigmatic, compelling face of the lover in her dreams.

She locked the garage and went to the side door that she preferred to use when entered the huge house that had been her family's home for longer than she'd been alive. She lived alone, now, the last remaining member of her family having died the previous year. She missed her grandmother tremendously, especially at night, when they had spent countless hours discussing the scope of Gabrielle's frequent visions and insights. Monica Sheraton had understood Gabrielle from the moment they'd met, and her death had left the young woman a wealthy and influential company, and more personal security than she'd ever imagined possible.

Gabrielle was turning the key in the lock when she felt the powerful presence in the garden a short distance from her. Fear froze her for several moments, then she forced herself to open the door and wait on the other side of it. As the panic receded, she felt a flutter in her stomach that was disturbingly familiar.

"Come into the house, if you wish," she said softly, knowing that the words would be heard.



When he stepped from the shadows, pale hair shimmering in the radiance of the full moon, she was unsurprised. She stepped aside, and he swept across the threshold in a graceful flow of motion that hardly ruffled the air with his passing.

Time stood still as those well-known indigo eyes caressed every inch of her trembling form.

"Who are you?"

The look he cast at her was openly amused, another expression she knew too intimately.

"You are joking, Gabrielle."

The voice was as she'd heard it so often, except that face to face, it had the feel of a silken stroke along her spine. Rich, deeply textured, and precisely modulated--it was the voice of one who could destroy with a word. Or, even more frightening, the voice of a man who knew what lay within her soul, carefully sheltered from her own sight. That knowledge was something he would exploit and use, as he had long ago. And she would allow him to do so, just as she had then. The instinct to go to him was more deeply ingrained than her instinct for survival. Had it always been this way?

"I am not," she finally replied, forcefully resisting the temptation to reach out to him. To touch the silvery hair, and draw the full, curving mouth to hers.

"LaCroix," he murmured, taking her hand and raising it to his lips.

The name sent an unmistakable, clearly visible shudder through her body, and she closed her fingers around his when he would have released her. The reluctance to lose his touch amused him; she saw it in the pale eyes that watched her with something akin to wonder.

"We have known each other in another life, have we not?"

"We have been everything to each other, Gabrielle. I had though you lost to me, forever."

For several long moments, silence engulfed the room and settled like a blanket over them. She eventually nodded, and her eyes rose to capture his. "you left me to their madness. You watched me die," she felt the surge of anger blossom. There was betrayal and accusation in her face as she watched her words register on his austere features.

"I did," he admitted. "But it was not a thing I was able to prevent. Another was responsible for your death, Gabrielle. Do you remember him?" As he watched the cloud of confusion grow within her eyes, the plan fell easily into place. He had been amazed to discover her weeks earlier, a chance glimpse as she left her office building late one evening. He'd learned all he could of her, delighted when her name remained the same, but even more intrigued by the whispers of her psychic abilities.

"I remember none but you," she told him, walking away when he accepted her words without comment, or noticeable surprise.

"I left you in the care of someone I trusted. He allowed you to be taken from me to save his own life."

Gabrielle let his words follow her into the darkened living room, and she went to stand at the window. She turned on no light, preferring the darkness as she always did. The moonlight streamed over the



meticulously kept gardens, painting the rich, vibrant colors with the frost-like sheen of cool silver.

LaCroix watched her from the doorway. She was as she had been two hundred years ago, a creature of extraordinary beauty and intelligence. Gabrielle had been bound to him as few others had ever been, her loss was one he **had**, in his fashion, mourned. He saw the specter of that lover in this perfect reincarnation, and he desired her with the same fiercely obsessive hunger that had made him claim her centuries earlier.

"You were there," Gabrielle repeated after several minutes of deep quiet.

"I arrived long after I could have saved you," he supplied. "You were near death. I have never forgiven Nicholas for that, Gabrielle," he lied smoothly. "I promised retribution for your death, Gabrielle. In another place, another time, but a promise nonetheless. It is a vow I still intend to keep."

"Nicholas?"

"The one I entrusted you to," LaCroix informed her, slowly slipping into the deep shadows at her back.

"I am not your Gabrielle, LaCroix," she whispered. The effort to deny him was a near pain, and she gripped the window frame to stabilize the sudden dizziness that assailed her.

"But you are," he murmured next to her ear. He reached around her, his fingers finding the buttons on her silk blouse. The sheer material parted and he traced the tiny cross that marred the perfection of skin above her heart. "They did this to you that night," he said, allowing his touch to brand the tiny symbol deeper into her mind than it was in her body. "They called you witch, and sentenced you to death."

"I was already dead," she said, finally daring to face him. "At least to their understanding of such a thing."

"So, you do remember what we were," he smiled.

"I don't know." She felt tiny and frightened in the presence of his overwhelming strength. Every part of her was screaming to escape this man, this creature from myth and darkness. Yet, he held her transfixed, lost and helpless in the raw sensuality of his nearness.

"I have searched so long for you, Gabrielle," LaCroix whispered, enjoying the heated warmth of her breaths fanning across his lips as she waited for him to touch her again. His gaze dropped to the open blouse and the provocative swell of pale skin revealed to him.

"You lie so easily," she replied. She reached out with a shaking hand, letting her small, delicate fingers slip beneath the rich fabric of his shirt. His skin was cool against her touch, and smooth as marble. The sensation lit a flare within her that quickly ignited a raging fire.

"You assume a great deal, my pet," LaCroix answered, the tone one of clear warning.

"And you, of course, do not," she said with a smile.

"I want your help," LaCroix told her with an honesty that was both shocking and disarming in its sincerity.



"You have never needed anyone." A hint of bitterness colored the words, made them a shaky admission of her fear of their truth.

"I believe I said I wanted your help," he reminded her, answering the fear with honesty that fed it, rather than soothed. "There is a considerable difference."

"I want you to leave me alone, LaCroix." Only as she made the statement did she recognize the accuracy of it. And, she waited for his answer, certain she already knew what it would be.

"You simply want me, Gabrielle," LaCroix remarked with an eloquent shrug of one shoulder. When she would have shaken her head in protest, he grabbed a fistful of auburn hair and covered her mouth with his. She went rigid in his arms, but he refused to release her. When he forced his tongue between her lips, she tried to push him away, and he countered the motion by pressing her against the wall.

"Don't. Please." The two words were tiny whimpers of sound that escaped her lips as he caressed her throat. The intent of that sensual, arousing tongue was something she understood, and it terrified her. "Tell me what you want?" It was a plea for freedom he wouldn't grant.

LaCroix drew back, eyes blazing hunger into hers. He laughed, the sound as it had always been, a mocking, cruel victory. When he reclaimed her lips, she welcomed him, and his kiss became seductive and luring. After eternal minutes, he gathered her into his arms and carried her up the curving staircase and into her bedroom. He placed her in the center of the huge bed, and stepped back.

Gabrielle watched through dazed eyes as he stripped out of his clothes, her body shuddering uncontrollably when he stood before her. Pale skin looked like alabaster in the moon's glow as it poured through the open window. Sculpted muscles gave him the regal presence of a god-like dream. Old memories stirred and consumed her, filling her with the knowledge of what it was to be possessed by LaCroix. She rose from the bed and quickly peeled away her own clothes. Then, she settled back on the pillows and opened her arms to him, accepting a Destiny that was as undeniable as LaCroix, himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dawn was approaching when LaCroix rose from the bed and walked to the window. He glanced down at the rapidly healing scar on his chest, and his smile was filled with satisfaction. He felt a tremor of desire wake when he allowed himself to remember the eagerness with which she'd taken his blood. Their joinings were as they had always been--wild, savage with mindless lust. Gabrielle was his, of that there was no doubt. If her talent to look into the future had remained intact was a thing yet to be seen. Without it she would be of little use to him.

He turned with a sigh and gathered his clothes, dressing as he watched her. She would wake in several days, and he would be waiting for her. If her psychic abilities had been brought across with her, he would have a formidable weapon against Nicholas. That he had taught her to hate Knight already would only make her more anxious to do what he wanted of her. Not that it had been necessary to persuade her with the



deception--she had always been a willing slave to his needs. He'd been right to give her to the maddened crowd two centuries ago so that he, Nicholas, and Janette could escape. The passage of time had supplied her with a tool he could use.

\*\*\*\*\*

By noon that day, news of Gabrielle Sinclair's death had reached the media. In the week that followed, Jared Langdon was appointed C.E.O. of the Sheraton Corporation, and the ancient house where Gabrielle had died was sold. In Toronto, Nick Knight knew nothing of the heiress, or her untimely death. It would be almost a year before his attention was drawn to the Sheraton Corporation and its owners, past and present.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Can you believe this?" Schanke complained. "This guy Langdon's just engineered a merger that'll make him rich all over again!" He tossed down his newspaper, envious disgust written all over his expressive features.

"What are you talking about?" Nick asked, finally absorbing some of the other detective's words.

"Jared Langdon," Schanke supplied with forced patience. His tone was one that was generally reserved for idiots and the deliberately obtuse, the latter being the category he currently classed his partner in. "He's an ex-P.I., and now he owns a multi-million dollar corporation! Some guys have all the luck."

"Who is Jared Langdon, specifically?" Knight queried, careful to keep his voice as polite and amused as Schanke's was frustrated.

"Don't you ever listen to the news, Knight?" Schanke replied, then went on to explain before Nick could form an answer to the rhetorical question. "Remember Gabrielle Sinclair? She died about a year ago?" When the name elicited no visible recognition, Schanke tossed the newspaper to his partner. "When her estate was settled, Langdon emerged as the sole heir."

Nick ignored the anticipation he read in Schanke's eyes, and picked up the paper. He felt an icy tremor begin at the base of his spine when he stared down into the beautiful face of a woman he'd watched die two hundred years in the past. Her face had haunted him for decades. LaCroix had fed her to the frenzied, blood-thirsty zealots pursuing them one night. Nick had tried desperately to go back for her, appalled that LaCroix would sacrifice her so carelessly. She'd adored the vampire, was devoted to him in a way no one else had ever been. Yet, to save Nick and Janette, LaCroix had left her behind.

Did he know that somehow she'd been reborn? Her face was the same, the smile an expression reflecting both innocence and timeless knowledge. He skimmed the words, and the chill grew. Psychic. He'd been a gifted psychic in this life, and her death was shrouded in mystery. Had LaCroix claimed her a second time? He knew the answer, didn't he?

Another place and time was now...



# *Lover*

*by Gillian Truscott*

i

I'll never forget the enchanting smile in his eyes--  
the slight wrinkles at the corners and  
the faint brightness shining through the clear blueness.

There was never a choice about smiling back, accepting the  
invitation and allowing my fingers to slide into his.

ii

I'll never forget the small intoxicating laugh in his deep voice--  
the rich warmth tumbling up his throat and  
the upturned corners of his wide, thin, yet sensuous mouth.

There was never a hesitancy about laughing back, tingling to  
his drawing nearer and pressing his chest to mine.

iii

I'll never forget the erotic softening of his face--  
the pale silver hair above his brow and  
the heated emotion casting over his penetrating eyes.

There was never a question of not yielding to that evocative look,  
feeling momentarily weak at his strong arms engulfing me.

iv

I'll never forget his mouth, hot and yearning and moist--  
the skimming over my cheeks and brushing of my eyelids and  
the deep hungering groan echoing in my ear.

There was never a doubt of not wanting his lips, feeling aroused  
at his hardness crushing into my loins impatiently.

v

I'll never forget his hands, grappling and clawing--  
the tugging of my gown and  
the swallowing of my skin through his very pores.

There was never a thought of not submitting totally to those  
demanding hands, becoming sweat-slick under his ravenous touch  
as he pulled me onto the bed.



I'll never forget...

forget...for--

the icy coldness piercing my naked breast, a sweet  
jolting into unbridled orgasm and--

Dying into unconsciousness.

## *Portrait*

*by Gillian Truscott*

slashes of vermillion  
anger on canvas

swirls of thalo green  
oil-tempered calm

splotches of umbered violet  
shades of meditation

hard edges of raw umber  
finality of purpose

wash of linseeded cream  
living coolness on canvas

shades of shadowed mauve  
brushtipped pulsing passion

strokes of faded cerulean  
arrogant patience regained

sculptings of oiled fleshtones  
pentimento-hidden animal sensuality

His Face--  
so brutally handsome, so complex, so mocking, so myterious  
challenges me from the canvas.



## Sydney's Tale

by Winifred M. McBeth

He is here again, the one who moves like a hunter. Why she trusts him, I do not know. He tries to befriend me, to smile at me. That one should know better than to bare his teeth. I bare my own and hiss in return. She does not approve, but she does not understand. Humans can be so blind. He would hiss back if she were not watching.

She tries to feed him what she eats herself. There is the scent of old blood on his hands, can't she smell it? He would rather have fresh, that is plain. Mind you, I, myself, enjoy the hunt in the alleys around the building. I am the terror of the pigeons on the roof. Still, that a human would feast so--it does not smell right.

He does not appreciate the value of a good stretch in the sun. He howled like a tom when I knocked aside the blinds. The burning smell was strong and made me sneeze. He has not stayed the day since then.

Sometimes, when she is late in returning, (late in feeding me), I catch his scent on her and it troubles me. She can be as foolish as a kitten around him. Humans cannot hold the wisdom of nine lives in their one. She will learn someday and I will be there to curl up in her lap and comfort her when she does.

He can protect her. He has that in his favor. When the Other came, the one that smelled of death and madness, this one, this hunter, made him go away. He did not kill the mad one for her. Just as well. She does not like dead things on her doorstep, not even mice.

He is trying to bribe me, now. I would not sample even the richest cream if it had his wolf scent on it. He knows that if he wishes to court her, he must get past me. He can try.

I can outlast him. He may be many things, but he is not a cat.





# Heartsong

by Pat Sgroi

It was a chilly day, but Billy Stellinski was sweating as he walked down the street. Was he being followed? Were they watching him? He didn't dare give his nervousness away by looking around, so he pretended that all was right with the world and he was just making his phone payment. He dropped the business size envelope into the mailbox and walked toward the bus stop. Safer to be in a group of people. If they were after him, they wouldn't shoot him in front of witnesses. He'd only taken a half dozen steps when three bullets whined through the silence, and Billy crumpled to the pavement.

When Nick Knight pulled his big Caddy into the police parking lot, he found his partner, Don Schanke, waiting for him. "What's up, Schank?" he asked, as Don slid into the passenger seat.

"Billy Stellinski got whacked this afternoon. We gotta go break the bad news to his brother and find out what he knows."

"Billy Stellinski? Wasn't he Joe Myrtelus' accountant?"

"Yup," said Schanke, "that's him. Keeper of the books for Joe Myrtelus, the biggest and slipperiest dope dealer in these parts. Stellinski was secretly helping us, sneaking out information that could put Myrtelus out of business."

"Looks like he got caught."

"Yeah, that's what we figure. Now we gotta see how much Billy confided in Johnnie Steele."

Nick was confused. "Johnnie Steele, the pop singer? Why would Billy confide in him?"

"Steele is just a stage name, partner. Johnnie Steele, aka John Stellinski, is Billy's brother."

Steele's apartment was in a posh highrise, but his expensive furniture looked a bit worse for wear, having been purchased during his days of platinum albums and sold out concerts. There had been none of those for over three years. Johnnie was saddened, but not shocked by the news of his brother's sudden demise. He knew what sort of people Billy had been involved with and the risk Billy had taken when he volunteered to help the police.

"Billy wanted to get away from Myrtelus for years," Steele told the detectives, "but Joe wouldn't let him go. He knew too much. See, when Billy started working for Myrtelus Enterprises, he didn't know it was a front for a drug operation. By the time he found out what he had gotten into, it was too late. He was trapped."

That statement jabbed at Nick's heart. If anyone knew what it was to feel trapped, to want out of a dirty life, it was Nick Knight, homicide detective, and vampire. In the first six hundred years of his immortal life, he fed on humans, but had stopped killing over a century ago. Now he tried to save lives, to bring killers to justice, in an attempt to repay society



for the lives he had taken. A vampire among mortals, he was trapped in a twilight existence, dead but alive, an inhuman being in human form, a man who was not a man, could not love like a man, have a wife and family, or even walk in the sunlight. Nick had searched the world over for a release from his cursed immortality, his blood thirst. He had come close to a cure a few times, only to see it snatched away at the last moment. LaCroix had seen to that.

Johnnie opened a panel in an endtable to reveal a safe inside it. As he continued to speak, he worked the combination of the safe. "Billy gave me an envelope for safe keeping. He said it had his notebook in it and papers that he would need if he had to testify against Myrtelus. He said if anything happened to him, I should give it to the police." He handed Nick a seal manilla envelope. "I sure hope there's something in there that will put away the filthy bastard who had Billy killed."

"I hope so, too," said Nick. "We've been trying to get Myrtelus for a long time, but never had enough admissible evidence to do it. Maybe this is just what we need. And now, Mr. Steele, if you think you're up to it, we need you to come with us to identify Billy's body."

"Might as well get it over with. And it's Johnnie, Detective Knight, just Johnnie."

"Okay. And it's just Nick, Johnnie."

As they walked out of the apartment, Schanke spoke up. "Hey, Johnnie, I really love your stuff, man. I have all your albums. My favorite is the Bouquet of Roses album. I put on "Be My Forever Lady" when I proposed to my wife."

"Yeah, that song's been played during a lot of proposals, not all of marriage, and it got me a gold record. I'd love to find another good one like that for the new album I'm cutting, a romantic song to a very special lady, one of those 'you are my everything' songs. But good songs are hard to come by."

Schanke was grinning. "Hey, Knight, why don't you show Johnnie your tunes?" Then to Johnnie, "He won't show them to me."

Steele looked at Nick. "You're a songwriter?"

"Not really," Nick said, with a shake of his head. "I just fool around with it sometimes."

Schanke jumped in. "Don't let him kid you, Johnnie. I walked in on him a couple weeks ago, and he was at the piano, writing a song. He wouldn't let me see the lyrics but the tune I heard was darned good."

Nick gave a little sideways grin. "I gotta remember to change my security code."

They were at the car, and just before Johnnie got in, he said to Nick, "I'd like to see your songs. Promise me you'll show them to me sometime?"

"I dunno. We'll see."

As Nick drove to the Coroner's Office, Johnnie's words echoed in his mind. "...a romantic song to a very special lady, one of those 'you are my everything' songs." They were on their way to Nick's very special lady, Dr. Natalie Lambert, Medical Examiner, who was the only mortal who knew his true nature, and was trying to help him cross over to mortality.

In the three years that he'd known her, she had become everything to him—his best friend, his confidante, his hope for salvation. He really cared for Nat, loved her like a sister, but suspected that her feelings for him were stronger than that. To Nat, Nick was not an evil monster, but a man, and she loved him as a woman loves a man. She knew that he could not love her in the same way, for a vampire's love, his passion, was expressed in the bite, the sucking of blood.

*The sun was reddening the sky as Nick pulled into his garage. When he walked into his apartment, he was not surprised to find Natalie there waiting for him. She was dressed in a white lab coat, and she looked flushed. Her lips were hot when she greeted Nick with a hard kiss.*

*"You're full of it this morning, aren't you, Nat?"*

*Her voice was soft and throaty. "Yes, I've had way too much to drink, I'm afraid. I AM full of it. But you are cold and hungry." Nat unbuttoned her lab coat and let it fall to the floor. Now she wore only a sexy black slip. "Come here, Darling, and let Dr. Lambert warm you up."*

*She pulled Nick onto the couch and kissed him passionately as she unbuttoned his shirt. Nick returned her kisses. Then she began to kiss and nip at his neck.*

*"Oh, Nat, you know what that does to me!"*

*"Yesss," she hissed, "and I know what you want to do to me. So do it, my love, DO IT!"*

*Nick threw back his head in a snarl, and plunged his fangs into her neck.*

*"Oh, YESSS!" Nat closed her eyes and curled her lips back to reveal her fangs. With a moan, she sank her teeth into Nick's neck, locking them into the most intimate vampire embrace.*

Nick woke with a start from his nightmare. His brow was wet, and his throat hot with thirst. He got up and went to the refrigerator, took out a wine bottle and poured some of its burgundy contents into a goblet, then took a swallow, letting the blood cool his parched throat. He had never had an erotic dream involving Natalie before. It must be that talking about romantic songs and thinking about his feelings for Nat had caused his mind to create this hallucination of her as his vampire lover.

Yes, the songs. Taking the unfinished song from the bench, Nick began to pick out the tune on the piano. Then he put it aside, took out fresh paper, and began to write a new song that expressed what he was feeling in his heart.

The next evening, as Nick was dressing for work, Schanke called. "Johnnie Steele got an envelope in the mail today containing more evidence against Myrtelus. Must be what Billy mailed just before he got popped. Captain wants you to pick it up on your way in."

"Okay, see you when I get there."

"Not tonight, partner. I'm outta here in exactly twenty-seven minutes."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. You have a hot date with Myra tonight."



"Very funny, Knight. Bowling with Gutterball Myra is not exactly my idea of a hot date. I don't know why I let her sign us up for a mixed league in the first place, but she was so eager to join."

"She probably figures it's one way to get you to come home at night. Have fun and give my love to Gutterball."

On his way out, Nick spotted the sheet music on the piano. He hesitated for a moment, then picked up two songs and went out the door.

A look of mild surprise came over Johnnie's face when he saw what Nick had composed. "Detective Schanke was right. These aren't bad. Not bad at all. Do you mind if I take them to my next session and hear how they sound?"

"No. Just don't tell Schanke, okay?"

The notebook and documents that Billy Stellinski had left contained the dates of drug transactions and names of Myrtelus' associates. For the next few weeks, Nick and Schanke were busy tailing these suspects, busting them, questioning them, gathering the evidence needed to put Myrtelus away for the rest of his life. Nick did not see much of Natalie during this time. Then Nat spent a week vacationing in Florida with her sister-in-law, Sarah, and her niece, Amy, and had just come back, tan and smiling. In her absence, Nick realized how much he missed having Nat around, how much a part of his life she had become. To celebrate her return, he had asked her out to a movie and dinner at his place Saturday night, and he felt like a teenager asking a girl out for the first time.

On Friday evening, as Nick was going out the door, the phone rang. He waited in his elevator doorway and let the machine answer. "Yeah, this is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado, so if you want to leave a message, go ahead."

"Nick, if you're there, pick up the phone." It was Schanke. "I'm afraid it's bad news, partner." Schank's idea of bad news was being out of donuts. Nick was in no mood to make a bakery run, so he waited for Don to continue. "It's about Natalie. There's a fire at her apartment building, and she can't be located. She's off work, and she's not answering her beeper. I'm leaving for her place now. I'll meet you there."

The last sentence was cut off by the slamming of the door.

Nick stood by his car and scanned the street to see if anyone was around. For a moment, he thought he sensed someone, thought he heard a heartbeat, but it was his own pounding heart that he was hearing. Blocking out that beat, he listened again. Nothing. The street was deserted. He willed himself upward, and silently lifted into the air.

As he flew across the city, Nick could see Natalie's building in the distance, a giant torch against the night sky. He felt the heat of the flames as he got closer and came down in the alley behind an adjacent building. He ran toward the blaze, but was stopped by a husky fireman.

"Hey, hey, where do you think you're going?"

Nick flashed his badge. "My best friend might be in there."

"I sure hope not. Anyone who didn't get out is dead by now. Sorry, officer. Maybe your friend is over there." The fireman nodded to a small

crowd of people around the rescue trucks. Nick scanned the group, but Nat wasn't there.

He stood transfixed by the brilliance of the flames and his own racing thoughts. Perhaps Nat had just gone out somewhere, to the store, to dinner, to visit a friend. Being a medical examiner, she always carried her pager with her, so she could be reached wherever she was. Nick walked to the nearest police car and used the radio to call in. No word on Natalie. They were still paging her, but she was not responding. Where the hell was she? Nick's mind raged against the thought that Nat might indeed be in the building, that he may have lost her. *Please, not now, not like this, not again.* This was the story of his life, to begin to care for someone, to get too close, to dare to hope, and then have it all snatched away. With Nat, he hoped he could stop this roller coaster ride.

Closing his eyes, Nick could see Natalie as she had looked on the night they met, her eyes wide with fear when he came to life on the examining table, when he took the sack of blood from the cooler and drank it. Her's were the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen, and the fear in them turned to wonder as she approached him, reached out her hand to touch this living vampire, who moments ago had been dead. He would never forget the intensity of that moment, the fragrance of her pulsing blood, the exquisite warmth of her hand against his cold skin, the concern in her face was she saw his sadness, his torment. "Let me help you," she had said, and he sensed in her the sincere desire to understand his alien nature, to help him achieve his impossible dream of immortality.

And so he had dared to trust her, and she had never betrayed that trust, never stopped searching for a cure. And he had dared to love her. He had never told her, never admitted it, even to himself until this moment, but standing there facing the fire that may have taken her from him, Nick realized that he loved Natalie as he had never before loved a mortal woman.

His eyes were still closed, but he could see the flames, and beyond the flames, he could see Natalie, reaching out, calling to him.

"Nick!" Her voice grew louder.

"NICK!" Now it seemed that her voice was coming from behind him.

"Nick!" He turned to see Natalie running toward him.

"Natalie!"

"Oh, Nick, I was so worried about you!" They threw their arms around each other.

"Worried about me? I was going crazy, worrying about you! Where were you? Why didn't you answer your pager?"

"I forgot to take it with me when I went to pick up Sidney." Nat had boarded her cat, Sidney, at the animal hospital when she went on vacation. "I didn't realize that I didn't have it until I got in the car to come home. Then I heard a news bulletin about the fire on the radio, and I was afraid that you would think I was in the building and do something crazy, like running in there to save me."

"Yes, for a few horrible minutes, I did think you were in there. Nat, we have to talk. Let's go to my place."



Don Schanke arrived in time to see them driving away. "Hey, Knight!" he yelled, but the car had passed him. "How the hell did he get here so fast?"

Nick and Nat sat facing each other on Nick's couch. He held her hands and looked into her beautiful eyes. "Nat, I thought I had lost you in that fire. In those awful moments when I thought you were gone, I realized how much I love you."

"Nick, do you know how long I've wanted to hear you say that? I think I've been in love with you since the beginning, but I didn't think you felt that same way, especially when you told me that you cared for me like a sister."

"Well, that's what I told myself, too. But these last few weeks, I've had to admit that you are much more to me than that."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I was afraid, Nat. It could be dangerous for you. And unfair to you. You deserve a man you can marry, have children with, a normal relationship. I can't give you that."

"What I deserve, Nick Knight, is a man who loves me, cherishes me, is loyal to me. I have that man right here. As for danger, I never feel safer than when I'm with you. You have protected me from danger more than once."

"And I want to keep you out of danger, protect you from ME. You know what I mean. I can't...love a woman...make love to a woman, because I'm not human. I could turn on you and..."

"NO! I don't believe that," Nat said, shaking her head. "You are not a killer anymore, Nick. You are a human being, a better human being than most mortals. I don't believe you would hurt me."

"I wouldn't want to, Nat. I would never deliberately hurt you. But if I...if I gave in to my desires, I can't predict what would happen."

Natalie took Nick's face in her hands. "Well, my love, I guess there's only one way to find out." She kissed him tenderly on the lips.

"Nat, don't..."

"Shhh," Nat said, and placed her finger on his lips, then replaced her finger with another kiss. Nick did not respond, but she continued, gently kissing his face and neck. Nick squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force back the feelings that were beginning to stir within him. When Nat kissed his lips again, and slid the tip of her tongue between them, a wave of pleasure flowed through him that melted his resistance. He began to respond, to kiss her back enthusiastically.

Their kisses were soft and light on each other's lips and faces, but gradually, their breathing became heavier, their kisses more intense. Their tongues danced together and their hands explored. Nick's hands found her breasts, and Nat let out a cry of pleasure. She slid her hand down his chest, over his thighs and stomach. Her fingers cupped his hardness. Nick moaned and arched back. Nat saw his yellow eyes and fangs.

"No, Nick! NO!" she screamed. Nick turned away. She jumped up and backed off, putting the arm of the couch between them. "Nick, I'm so SORRY! I was sure that you could..."

"Could control my basic instincts?" His voice was a breathy growl and he buried his face in his hands. "You thought I could behave like a human being, but I told you, I'm not human. I'm a damned vampire! A killer! I could have killed you. Oh, Nat, I'm sorry. You must hate me."

"NO! I don't hate you. I LOVE you!"

"How can you love me after what I've done? Can't you see that I'm dangerous? Get away from me, Nat. Go! Go find someone else to love."

Nat sat next to him and put her hand on his arm. "Nick, look at me." He turned toward her, but could not look at her. There was a pale, pink tear running down his cheek, his first near-human tear. She tenderly brushed it away, and through her own tears, said, "I'm not going anywhere, Nick. I don't want to find anyone else." She cradled his head to her chest and rocked gently. "It's okay, Nick. It's okay. I understand now. What happened was my fault. I shouldn't have started that, and we won't do anything like that again until we've found a way to make you mortal."

"But we may never..."

"It doesn't matter! We'll keep trying, but if we never find a way, it still doesn't matter. What matters is that we love each other and we can be together, be close like this. This is enough for me, Nick."

As Natalie continued to speak, Nick sat up, took her hands in his and kissed them. Then he held her hand to his cheek, as he had done on that first night, three years ago.

"What matters is that we don't have to be alone anymore. Neither of us. We've made progress in the past three years, and it may take another three, or ten, but we'll keep working on it. Together. Isn't that the most beautiful word? Together?"

"Yes, and you are the most beautiful person I have ever met." He hugged her tenderly. "I thank fate for bringing me to you, for bringing us together. I dared not dream of you being with me like this, and now that you are, I don't want you to leave."

"You may get your wish," Nat said, and Nick drew back to look at her face. "I'll need a place to stay until I find another apartment. May I stay here?"

"Oh, yes! For as long as you like. Stay forever."

Rays of sunlight fell on the vase of yellow daisies on the kitchen table, on the smear of egg yolk and toast crumbs on the single plate. A safe distance away on the couch sat Nick, in pajamas and robe, reading the morning paper. The elevator door opened, and Nat walked in, wearing a long robe and fuzzy slippers, and carrying a cup of coffee in one hand and two envelopes in the other. One envelope was brown and padded, the other one white and legal size. "Mail's in," she said, setting down the cup.

"Sure is nice to be able to look at it before sunset. Anything good?"

Nat looked at the white envelope. "It's from my insurance company." She tore it open, and her face lit up. "Yes! The check has finally arrived! Now I can start looking at apartments."



Nick shot her a look that was a mixture of surprise and hurt. "But there's no hurry. It could take a couple of months to find just the right place, one that takes cats."

He looked over at Sydney sleeping peacefully on the piano, then back to Nat, who was smiling at him, and he smiled back. Nat sat close to him and handed him the padded envelope. "For you, from Johnnie Steele."

Nick opened it, took out a folded white paper and a cassette tape. He read the paper, then put it all on the coffee table.

"What is it?" Nat asked.

"Just business," Nick replied, with a devilish twinkle in his eye. Nat took the paper and read it:

"Dear Nick"

I thought you might like to hear your song. The album will be out in three months, and it looks like it could be a big one. Thanks again for the song, and for getting rid of Myrtelus. Any time I play Toronto, you've got comps and a backstage pass.

Forever grateful,  
Johnnie Steele"

Nat looked puzzled. "What's this all about?"

"Oh, nothing." Nick had to bite his lip to keep from grinning. "Johnnie recorded a song of mine, that's all."

"That's all? Don't you want to hear it?"

"I know what it sounds like."

"Well, I want to hear it!" She rushed over to the stereo, popped in the tape, and sat next to Nick again. The voice of Johnnie Steele filled the room.

Wandering through the night,  
Through a dark and lonely life,  
I was running fast,  
But I could not escape the past.  
Then you discovered me,  
Found out my true identity,  
But you did not run away.  
You came into my life to stay.

Nat's mouth fell open with the realization that the song was about her. She turned to look at Nick, who had brought his hand to his mouth to conceal his expression. At the sound of her name, tears welled up in her eyes.

Oh, Natalie, how can I tell you  
How much you mean to me?  
How can I make you see?  
Natalie, how can I thank you  
For trying to make a man of me,  
For trying to set me free?

"Oh, Nick!" was all she could say as she snuggled up to him and put her head on his chest. Nick stroked her hand as Johnnie Steele continued:

Now I'm not alone,  
Don't have to face life on my own,  
For you are by my side  
To help me stop the endless ride.  
You know what I have done,  
And what I'm trying to become,  
And you're the only one  
Who ever helped me find the sun.

Oh, Natalie, how can I tell you  
All that you are to me,  
All you help me be?  
Natalie, how can I thank you  
For all that's you've done for me,  
For trying to set me free?  
I love you, Natalie.

Nat sat up and looked into Nick's eyes. "I love you, too." They kissed and held each other, and Nick knew that Natalie had been right. What really mattered was their love for each other and being together.



## *Blood Games*

*by Denyse M. Bridger*

### *The hunt begins...*

You are such a fool, Nicholas. You never saw that she belonged to me long before you tried to 'save her'. Your beautiful Amanda had sold her soul to **me**; the devil in your dreams, Nicholas. She's as wild and untamed as she is lovely, Nicholas. Did you know that, dear boy? Did you want to know that? Her passion is as savage as her hunger, now. She sleeps in my arms, Nicholas. Does that haunt you? Does it anger you to know that she willingly comes to my bed--that she cries my name as I possess her. My blood flows through her veins, Nicholas. She loves me as you never did. As I will never love her.

### *Blood games...*

They fall before her, Nicholas. Young fools clamor for her attention, and she laughs at their weakness. I've taught her well, Nicholas; she has a flair for the game. You found one of hers last night. Did you know that? The boy in the park was Amanda's destruction of you. Didn't you see the resemblance, Nicholas? She hates you as you once loved her. Do you understand why that is, my Nicholas? She despises you, because you hurt me. The irony is so sweet, is it not? She drank until the boy had nothing left to offer her, then she turned another, stronger hunger to me.

### *After the kill...*

The nights are a madness all their own, Nicholas. She thrives on the terror we incite--and the lust we share after the kill. You never knew that thrill, did you, Nicholas? She writhes in exquisite agony, consumed by a need she cannot control. I hold that key, Nicholas. She does my bidding, whatever it may be, and she begs for reward afterward. I bring her to her knees, Nicholas, and she thanks me for it. She loves me as you never did. As I will never love her. She loves me as I once loved you, Nicholas.

# *The Stalker*

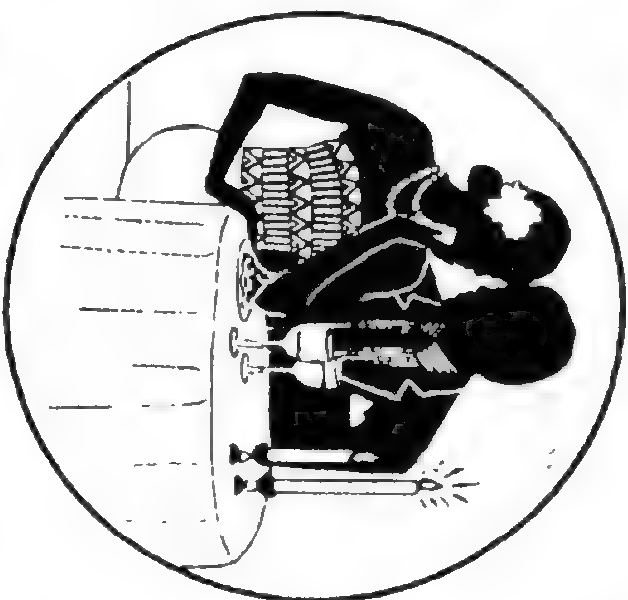
*by Pam Jensen*

He moves among the green and brown shards of  
broken  
Bottles, pavement littered with torn  
scraps  
Of paper, messages between people now  
discarded.  
A trail of cigarette stubs, and air fragrant with moldering  
trash,  
Brown paper bag embraces wine bottle, ragged and  
crushed  
Fibers that do nothing to filter the perfume of a wine gone  
stale.  
The street people are gray in color as if becoming indistinct and  
smudged  
By their daily struggle against erasure, making of them  
shadows  
To whom streetlights have become a natural enemy offering only an  
illusion  
Of warmth; using newsprint as blankets against the chill air of  
night.  
He comes seeking one with O+ blood, hidden amongst the  
worn  
Bodies huddled next to bags of their few worldly possessions.  
Death  
In white medical garb with a holy mission of familial  
vengeance.  
He whispers his litany, "For you, Mother." For the hepatitis  
virus  
Transmitted through transfusion by an unknown donor of  
questionable  
Quality, for a few pieces of silver, whose life this very night is  
forfeit.



## APERITIF

He nipped at her neck,  
He sucked out her blood.  
Removed her from herself,  
But not entirely;  
Just a bit to spare.  
He sampled her fine wine,  
Blood he now will share.



*With apologies...*

## *Thicker Than Water*

*by Winifred M. McBeth*

"We're both due on duty in thirty minutes, you know." Detective Nick Knight kept his voice modulated to avoid dirty looks from the museum guards.

"Yeah, I know that, but you've got to see this," Dr. Jack Brittington looked over his shoulder to be certain that Nick was still following.

Nick checked his watch, then looked back at a large sculpture that they had passed in some haste. "Since when have you been into 'art' anyway?"

Jack pulled up short and glared at him. "I am vast, I contain multitudes," he quoted to the officer in a voice that was grumpy as well as sarcastic.

"I didn't mean it that way," Nick apologized hastily. "So, where is this painting?" He looked at his watch again.

Jack frowned and scanned the room, and took reference from the sculptures. "Back that way," he said firmly, turning around and pointing through an archway behind Nick.

Nick resignedly retraced his steps. "Are you sure you know where we're going?"

"Left here," he was ordered from behind.

"There!" With a little flourish of triumph, Jack gestured toward a large canvas displayed in the center of the near wall.

Nick pivoted to look fully at the painting. He hissed an intake of breath, then murmured something under his breath in provincial French.

Jack smiled smugly, satisfied with Nick's reaction. "I thought you'd be interested. The second face from the right looked a little familiar to me."

The painting was an arm-span wide and nearly as high, surrounded by a heavy frame of thick gilt. The setting was a moonlighted wood, branches in shadow, and leaves of pale silver. A mounted hunting party was scattered across the foreground, each rider dressed in dark shades of Renaissance elegance. The members of the party were talking and smiling, waiting casually for the hunt to begin.

A woman in the foreground looked out of the painting and fixed an observer with a cool, disinterested stare. She held the only hunting bird in the group, a snowy owl that also looked outward, but with a predatory interest.

Beside her, second from the right, a young man with dark hair gestured to make a point to the man across from him.

Cocky at his success, Jack looked from the painting to the police officer, comparing the likenesses, but his enthusiasm dimmed when he saw the look of horror on Nick's face.



Nick stepped forward slowly and raised a hand toward the painting. The motion was enough to alert one of the museum guards. "Excuse me, sir," the guard said politely and halted when Nick turned to him--a double image to the subject posed in the painting. He blinked, continuing his warning. "Please don't touch the exhibits."

Nick stared at him dully as though trying to piece together what the guard had said. Anxious to avoid a scene, Jack tugged on the policeman's arm and told the guard, "Thank you, we'll be careful. My friend just wanted a closer look." The guard took another look at the image in the painting and returned to his post.

Jack dragged Nick to a bench in front of the painting. "What's wrong with you?" he asked urgently.

"Who did this?" Nick sank slowly to the bench without acknowledging Jack's question. "Who put this here, in public like this?"

Jack went toward the painting. "The description plaque says that it's on loan from," he hesitated, before continuing, "the LaCroix Memorial Foundation."

"Jeanette?" A crimson patch spread across Nick's ashen complexion, as though he had been slapped in the face. "Jeanette did this?"

"Who is Jeanette?" Jack prompted him.

Nick pointed to the painting, at the woman carrying the owl. "That is Jeanette. She told me where to find LaCroix. She would have known," he made a sound too weak to be laughter. "Anyone would have known what would happen. The fire was very public and so is this exhibit."

"What does it mean, Nick?" Jack studied his friend. "What is so wrong about this painting?"

Nick closed his eyes as a look of renewed pain settled oddly on his youthful face. "It reminds me of what I am."

"What you were," Jack corrected him firmly. He gestured briefly toward the canvas. "The rider, the second from the right..."

"It is me. I am talking to LaCroix." As he studied the painting, Nick seemed to age. "He led us; he led the hunt. It was his idea."

Nick sat rigid and stared at the image of his past. "The English have a legend, about the lost souls who run from the Wild Hunt led by the lord of the dead. LaCroix made it sound like a game, some wonderful new diversion. We had so much time on our hands, you see." Nick held his hands out, like a child showing that he had washed up.

As Jack stared at his friend, he became suddenly, eerily reminded that he had not been human for a very long time. "What did you hunt?"

Nick did not answer at first. He wiped his hands on his jeans. He answered finally, his voice too low to have been heard except in an empty museum, "No one that anyone would miss."

Jack reached out, intending to offer the support of a human touch, but in spite of his intention, his fingers curled under and away from any contact with the vampire. He withdrew his hand and shoved it into a pocket instead.

"When I realized what we were doing, I broke away from the hunt," he continued his confession in the same even tone. "One of the...quarry ran in front of my horse. I wanted to help him, but he was terrified of me. He

kept brandishing this tree branch that he'd torn off. He was cut all over from running through the underbrush. I could smell it." Nick brought his hand up to his face in an almost fastidious gesture. "His heartbeat was so fast, so strong...the best I could do was to chase him away from the path of the hunt. I never knew if he got away or not."

Nick turned away from the painting. It had begun to stare back at him. "LaCroix did not notice that I was gone until after the hunt. He was...not pleased. He demanded an explanation." He grimaced in a sharp flash of white. "He didn't like it." Nick drew his hand past his eyes, as if to wipe out the memory.

The vampire stood up suddenly and Jack, with a nervous glance at the guard, put a cautionary hand on his arm. "Nick, let it go."

Nick shrugged off the warning hold. "After I get rid of that painting."

Jack made a grab to reach Nick's arm. They were definitely attracting the attention of the guard. "What did you have in mind?" he whispered urgently.

Nick flashed him a strained smile that showed too much to be reassuring. "I'm going to buy it."

The coroner had never boasted a talent for lip-reading, but discovered that he had some ability for charades as he watched Nick approach the guard.

The vampire gestured broadly toward the painting as he spoke to the guard. The guard stared at him in surprise and shook his head. Nick shrugged, took out his evidence notebook. he scrawled on it hastily and rolled it up with green paper from another pocket before passing it to the guard. The guard studied him and the paper once more and finally nodded. Nick turned and came toward his colleague.

"Come on," the police officer said. "We don't want to be late for shift."

The shift that followed was, by Detective Schanke's description, the worst that he had ever spent with his partner. "I'm tellin' you, Doc! Okay, so he's always on me about smokin' in his Caddy. Fine! But tonight it's 'Don't mess with the mirror' and 'Don't eat in the car'. I offered to share! Then Brunelli asks him if maybe he could take days for a week and he jumps down his throat! Doc, I'm not ambitious, but I got career plans: retirement, pension. Is that too much to ask? So I try to talk to him, 'Knight, just act a little more human, okay?' Total silence. You'd think I kicked his puppy. If I hadn't needed a ride back to my car--"

The commentary came to a halt when Schanke's partner walked into the lab. Nick scuffed a tennis shoe on the floor. "Listen, Schanke, I..."

Schanke held up his hands in prompt surrender. "I'm gone. I'm going home now, so my wife can take her turn at me." He backed out of the room. "Kid, take my advice: go home, get some sleep, eat something. Tomorrow we can start this over again. Maybe make nice with Brunelli." His parting gesture was made with both hands palms together, invoking the mercy of whatever power would listen.

"Hey, kid, eat something." When Jack said this, Nick turned around to glare at him. Dr. Brittington picked up a mug and forced it into Nick's hands. "Two swallows."

"What is it?" The question came automatically.



The coroner answered him deadpan, "Nightshade. Drink it. It's good for what ails you."

Nick grimaced and sniffed at the mug before finally choking down a swallow. "Satisfied?" He managed to sound like a man in the last throes of drowning.

Jack held up two fingers. When Nick tried to argue, Jack calmly reminded him, "When you stopped drinking human blood, you got your reflection back, didn't you? And since you've been using the tanning bay, you're more comfortable with ultraviolet light." Nick continued to grumble, but Jack stared him down. He waited patiently through the ritual protests and rolling of the eyes and lamentable gargling noises. Only when the second swallow went down and stayed down was he satisfied. Nick set the mug down and shoved it across the counter.

"So," Jack made a quick check of the level of the tea in the mug. It was down. "How's life?"

Nick rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "You tell me."

The coroner wore a sour schoolmaster look. "You do not work and play well with others."

The vampire laughed and shrugged. "If he calls me 'kid' one more time, I'll tell him just how old I am."

"I want to see that." Jack sipped at the 'nightshade' tea. "Anything else bothering you?"

Nick was reluctant to speak. Jack knew better than to try to rush things. He sipped his tea patiently. Nick finally reached back and pulled an envelope out of his jean pocket. He tossed it onto the counter.

Jack picked up the envelope and examined it. It was made of expensive paper and addressed simply to "Detective Nick Knight" in bold, flowing longhand. "What is this?"

"The answer to my bid on the painting." Nick had looked at the 'nightshade' tea with less ambivalence than he was directing at the envelope. "It's an invitation to a party at Jeanette's."

"A party?" Jack raised an eyebrow in surprise. A woman who would display her spite in a museum hardly seemed the sort to extend such an invitation.

Nick shrugged. "She likes to give parties. To show off her collections--of art, of friends." He smiled, half-rueful, half-wistful. "I remember when we celebrated the liberation of Paris."

"Which war would that be?" Jack asked the question with bland innocence and Nick duly ignored it. The coroner tried another, more pointed, question. "Are you going to go?"

The vampire looked, for a moment, as though he would rather drink some more nightshade, but he nodded. "She won't make a scene at her own party."

"Do you want a designated driver?" Jack volunteered.

"The way you drink?" Nick clicked his fingernails against the tea mug. "I'd have to carry you out!"

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When Nick stepped into the room to mingle at the party, he fought the feeling of being exposed to full sunlight.

Clutches of guests were scattered around the room, holding conversations or admiring the artwork. One or two clusters were obviously Not Noticing him. Their faces seemed familiar, but the names eluded him.

A servitor glided up, tray in hand, full of identical glasses, each filled with the house vintage. Nick smiled regretfully, shook his head. Since the group in the corner seemed especially smug to Not Notice this, he took a turn himself at ignoring them.

"Can I offer you a drink?" A smooth tone came from behind him and he turned around as though it had been a thread that tugged at him. He faced the hostess of the party and felt the pull release with a painful snap.

She was flawless as ever, dressed in a black silk sheath, her hair pulled back tightly in a French braid. She wore black gloves that reached the sleeve of the dress. One hand gestured casually to the servitor who stood beside her. The contents of the single glass on the tray was clear, a thin, round, slice of lime rested on the bottom.

"Water?" he laughed, then looked back at her in hope of seeing his laughter returned.

She smiled coolly and picked up the glass by the stem from the tray. "It's what you're drinking, isn't it?" She held it out and, as he accepted it from her, his fingers felt a chill.

"You'll understand," she said softly, "if I must see to my other guests." She smiled at him, a brief, ironic turn of the mouth. "You can circulate for yourself." She glided away, disappearing as quickly as frost warmed by a breath.

"Jean Pierre, is it?" Nick turned again to face one of the smug group that had broken away from the rest. His memory told him that the face was familiar, arrogant look and all, but declined to furnish him with a name. He settled for distant politeness.

"Yes, but it's Nick now." In the corner, the rest of the clique looked on with the same twisted amusement as they might watch someone tease a caged creature.

"Yes, of course, a change now and then does one good," his questioner said archly. "You may call me Henri now." Nick's memory flatly denied any association with the name.

Henri's hands were restless, turning and twirling a glass that was half-drained of the house blend. Henri caught Nick watching the liquid swirl and splash in the glass and he held it toward him. "Would you like some?"

"No," Nick's sudden denial came coarsely from a dry throat. He looked away from the glass. "No."

Henri darted a triumphant look toward the corner before returning his attention to Nick. He raised his glass and indulged in a slow swallow. "So, aren't you the narc?"

"Vice doesn't interest me," Nick answered him levelly. Not to be outdone, he raised his own glass and somehow managed to swallow the water without gagging. "I spend most of my time at the morgue."



Henri shrugged casually. "Well. Waste not, want not." Deprived of a proper reaction, his attention began to wander around the room. "Have you looked at any of the paintings?" Before Nick could explain that he had just arrived, Henri drew him toward one of the exhibits. "Let's start with the one by this aquatic contraption, shall we?"

A tall, narrow aquarium was set against the wall, the fish divided by water pressure each into its own social strata. The unfortunate effect was of a waterlogged phone booth.

The painting beside it was centuries removed from such gadgetry. The frame was of gilt wood, simply carved as not to distract the viewer's attention from the painting. The subject was a woman, favored with fabled ebony hair, snow-white skin, and blood-red lips. yet no fable had ever had such a wry turn to the mouth nor such an aloof look in the eyes. She was seated in a languid pose, dressed in an antique froth of lace and velvet. There was some background, but it showed only as indistinct and shadowed shapes around the central figure.

"I can see why she kept this one," Henri said with a fashionable trace of boredom in his voice. "The likeness favors her without flattery. Of course," he smothered a smirk in a mouthful of house red, "one wonders how the artist persuaded her to stay still long enough."

Nick had seen the painting before, but not in a long time. As he gazed at it now, with its familiar brushwork and ever more familiar image, he had to admit to himself that, in this case, the subject had captured the artist. He saluted with his glass. "The secret is that you must engage her interest."

Henri raised a speculative eyebrow at the pride in Nick's voice and looked again at the painting. He bent closer to examine the signature and made a satisfied noise, like a cat discovering cream in a bowl.

"Well," he said to Nick in an unctuous purr. "I had no idea. Do you still...?" He stopped short, his face took on a look of surprise suitable to a cat that has realized the milk is sour.

Nick wondered what he could have done to fall from favor so abruptly until he realized was starting behind him, rather than at him. He obligingly turned around to see his reflection blink back at him from the mirror behind the aquarium. A solitary fish swam past it, going in one ear and out the other with a disinterested flip of his tail.

Nick joined his reflection in a drink before turning around to face Henri. "One hundred twenty-seven years, four months and two days," he quietly answered the question that seemed caught in Henri's throat. He had kept a careful count since the night he had made his last kill, hoping that it was a countdown to the day he could watch the sun rise.

Henri washed down the last of the house wine in his glass. He appeared flustered, but his clique seemed more interested in an eccentric bit of sculpture some distance away than in his discomfort. A last desperate gesture with the empty glass brought a servitor with a full tray.

Henri snatched at a full goblet. "Can I get you anything?" Nick shook his head, covering the glass with his hand. "Oh, of course," Henri's voice was flat, but he seemed to recover after taking a sip. "Surely we can man-

age something." He smiled archly and whispered to the servitor, who hurried off. "He'll be back in a moment with something suitable. Shall we move on?"

Nick would rather have faded into a shadow on the wall, but saw no way to dislodge his companion which would not bring him more attention. A quick scan of the room in search of the hostess told him only that he himself seemed to be one of the more interesting exhibits. Nick resigned himself to the evening and fell in step with Henri.

He didn't fail to notice that this took him past the eccentric bit of sculpture that was surrounded by so many admirers. Rather than stop at half measures, Nick emptied his glass in full view of the spectators. The stir this caused very nearly made up for the unpleasant slosh it made going down.

"Here we are! The pride of the collection!" Henri stopped with a grand flourish in front of the painting of the wild hunt. "It's a marvelous piece, isn't it?"

Nick stared at it, trying to keep his expression civil, and decided that this was one reflection that he would be well rid of. He tilted his glass, but came up empty.

"Oh, of course," Henri was suddenly solicitous. He offered his drink again. "If you're sure you won't...?" Nick shook his head. "Let me get you something then. Where is that--" He signalled, which brought over the waiter with the waterglass. Henri traded the empty glass for the full one and held it up for inspection. He seemed to be offering a toast to the rest of the party.

Nick took it from him hastily and turned his back to the spectators. He paused to make certain that the drink was clear, then took a healthy gulp. It went down as smoothly as poison.

"I see some faces I recognize in here." Henri, his attention on the painting, failed to see how he nearly was sprayed with water. When he turned to look at Nick, the other had safely downed his second swallow. Henri winked conspiratorially. "Herself, of course. And isn't that LaCroix? I haven't seen him since..." A shrug and a dismissal. "I wonder what he's been up to."

Nick held off on a third swallow. Although he was suddenly quite thirsty, his drink was not having a pleasant landing. "Do you know how the Wild Hunt ends?" His voice was hoarse. "The huntmaster becomes the prey and he is run to ground by the hunt."

Henri grimaced, no doubt at his having said something vulgar at a party. Nick favored him with a tight smile and turned again to face the painting. The slight movement made him unaccountably dizzy and he shook his head to clear it, but this made the imbalance worse. He tried to stand very still. He stared at the painting, struck with the impression that it looked different now than when it had been hanging in the museum.

He blinked and looked again. Red. There seemed to be a crimson aura around the figure. Odd that the museum lighting hadn't shown it. He tried to ask Henri if he saw it, too, but a smear of red across his vision followed the movement. He knew then that his sudden thirst had nothing to do with water.

"Is something wrong with your drink?" Henri asked blandly. Nick tried to answer him, but the hunger hit him full force, throwing him off balance.

His equilibrium spun. He felt as if he'd suddenly flown into a storm wind. As he reached out for balance, he felt the floor shudder underneath him. He folded one leg to himself and braced it, trying to fight the hunger, to regain the balance which kept it quiescent. He heard Henri's voice, but couldn't understand it. His perception was quickly narrowing to who was warmblooded and who was not. By that measure, he was very nearly alone in the room.

Another voice, this one quite angry. Nick recognized it as Jeanette's. Perhaps she was upset that he had disrupted her party. Someone snatched the glass from his hand. "White blood?" She was angry, but not at him. "You gave him white blood?"

He had been poisoned, after a fashion. He would never have recognized the taste of plasma; the medical process to make it was developed long after he had stopped drinking that sort of thing. The hunger rose up and snarled. It wanted very much to be fed again.

"Put him in my office, and see to him." Hands lifted him and his awareness spun again. He had once been fool enough to fly during a rainstorm and had narrowly missed being hit by lightning. This sensation was rather similar, except that instead of the irregular rumble of thunder, the steady murmur of a heartbeat sounded in his ears.

The hunger hissed and tried to pursue the heartbeat, but a strong grip held him back and propelled him away from the sound. He was half-carried for a short distance more and then settled onto something comfortable. Now that he was not moving, he fought for a return of his control.

The returning thunder of a heartbeat nearby unsettled his concentration. His hand was lifted and touched to a pulse-point in a gesture of invitation. "No!" he shouted, pulling back his hand as though the body heat had scorched it. He hissed in the direction of the heartbeat in an attempt to warn it away.

"Leave us." A calm voice and the touch of a hand on his cheek as cool as sanity. Another brusque order followed, directed at him this time. "Drink this." He sniffed it warily. It was of the same vintage as his private stock at home; it would satisfy the hunger without making it stronger. He gulped obediently as relaxed as sobriety settled in. He had soon recovered enough to hold the glass for himself.

He blinked to resolve his focus and looked up to see Jeanette. She sat across from him, unruffled as though nothing had happened. The picture of composure was made imperfect by the contrast of her bare, white arm against the black silk of her dress. She had pulled off her glove to tend to him and left it in an untidy heap on the table beside her.

"Poor Jean Pierre," she purred in a nearly convincing mimic of her customary aloofness. The concern in her eyes gave the lie to her voice. "When was the last time you fed?"



LaCroix had used those same words to call him out, to taunt him. From Jeanette, they meant only puzzlement. He summoned his best gallant smile, albeit ragged around the edges and reached out to pull her hand to him. He kissed the inside of her wrist as his answer.

She pulled her hand back, her smile a cynical twist. Jeanette knew better than to believe that the night she saw him brought over was the last time he had tasted blood. She watched him empty his glass. "Why do you fight it so hard?"

This was the question that had split them apart finally. Nick considered his answer. Perhaps this time he could explain and she would understand. "Because of what I get if I win."

"You will die," she retorted sharply.

"But I will live first," he countered. "I'll be part of the successes and failures and joys and sorrows that mean so much because life is brief." He looked at her, his eyes bright and his hands extended, waiting again for her approval.

She sat very still, stared at him, and raised her shield of cool distance once more. "You are losing your perspective, Jean Pierre. You 'human' endeavors and 'human' pleasures will mean very little in the end, because they are over so quickly. Mortal memory is so very fleeting. There will be nothing left of you but dust."

He offered her another ragged smile, and saluted her with the red-tinted glass. "What price immortality?" When she refused to reply, he set the goblet down next to her rumpled glove. "Another thing to come between us."

She looked away from him to the glass and silence filled the void between them. "I'm sorry," Nick said finally, "that I ruined your party."

Jeanette's eyes sparked. She was angry, but not at him. "You did nothing." The even line of her mouth rumped into a scowl. "I told Henri what I thought of him and his little prank. Neither he nor the accomplice who kept me busy will be pulling any stunts in one of my clubs for a very long time!" The cutting, upward arch of an eyebrow served to emphasize that, with Jeanette, 'long' could be very long indeed. "I didn't invite you here to be made a spectacle of."

Nick set his chin stubbornly. "Then why did you hang that painting in public?"

Jeanette studied him with a measuring look before she asked, with feigned casualness, "What's wrong with the painting? I think the likeness is very flattering."

Nick made a frustrated noise that fell short of being a laugh. "You and your artists!" He threw his hands up in an exasperated motion. "You must have enjoyed the wild hunt much more than I did."

"No," Jeanette denied flatly. "LaCroix enjoyed fostering a pack mentality, if only so he could be its leader."

"Oh, is that all?" Nick sat rigidly, a challenging posture. "It was too messy for you?"

"Don't lecture me, Jean Pierre!" Her retort sparked back. "It's not as though you yourself never made a kill!"

He flinched and closed his eyes. "One too many."

"Jean Pierre." He could not see that she reached out to him, but did not touch him. "The wild hunt was wrong and cruel and you were not the only one who left it."

He opened his eyes and looked at her with surprise. "I reined my horse and headed for home. I saw you try to help that mortal. He could have killed you with the wood he held." She shook her head over his foolish chances.

Had she stood before him in broad daylight, he could not have been more startled. When Nick had finally composed himself, he said, "I never knew if he got away."

"Oh, yes!" She leaned back on one hand, as casually as if she were passing along gossip at one of her parties. "When you rode away, LaCroix nearly rode to where he was hiding," she drew out a smile of sweet victory, "but an owl flew at his horse and startled it. He chose to do his hunting elsewhere."

Nick looked at Jeanette, remembering the image in the painting, seeing also the moving memory of her in hunting finery and carrying on one wrist a snow hunting owl. Quiet, relieved laughter rose from him that wiped away the dark stain associated with the other memories of that night. She did not share in his laughter, but there was a gleam of pleasure in her eyes.

He took a deep breath and let it out, a skill that had taken some practice. "When I saw the painting in the museum, I thought..."

"That I had hung it there," the pleasure dimmed a bit, "to hurt you." She shook her head. "You know how we do things, Jean Pierre, to build our fortunes, to protect ourselves. I was named as trustee in his will. That is why your message was given to me. LaCroix put the painting up there to bring you to him. LaCroix wanted you to remember the wild hunt."

"LaCroix wanted me to become a killer again." Nick stared at the stain in the glass. "He succeeded in that much."

Jeanette reached out a slender hand and pulled up Nick's chin in her fingers until he looked straight at her. "If you were," she said archly, "I wouldn't be picking you up off the floor at my parties."

Nick smiled crookedly. "Do you remember Chicago?"

Jeanette let go of his chin and reached for her glove. "I remember," she said softly. "You and your baseball."

Nick shrugged ruefully, but any reply he would have made was cut off by a knock at the door of the office. Jeanette rose gracefully and answered it. She exchanged a few, brief words with the servant who had knocked and he passed her a long cardboard tube. She closed the door and came back to stand in front of the couch to face Nick. "I have a present for you." She held out the tube. "This is the painting you wanted--the wild hunt."

Nick tried to thank her, but she shrugged it off. "The museum will have to be content with some other piece." She made a careless wave of her hands, one gloved, the other not. "Do what you want with it."

"I brought something for you," Nick told her. If she would not accept his thanks, she would always accept presents. "It's in my jacket." He looked around awkwardly and found it tossed over the far end of the couch, evidently by one of the servants who had carried him in. He rummaged through the pockets until he found a small frame that fit in his open hand.

Jeanette accepted it prettily enough, but when she saw the picture in the frame, she hissed and moved her fingers to the edges as though afraid they would burn. It was a copy of the sunrise that Nick kept on video display in his loft. "This is a photograph!" All traces of her cool composure had fled. "Where did you get this?"

"I took it myself," Nick admitted shyly. Jeanette looked at him the way she was holding the picture: warily, as though he could radiate the killing heat himself. That look frightened him, divided the two of them more surely than any of their fights.

He stammered out an explanation, "I...I set up the tripod on the roof, set the timer, and aimed the camera east." He gestured broadly and ran his fingers through his hair, trying to keep talking through a full confession. "I was going to get undercover, but I wanted..." He held his arms out, hands clenched, grasping at what forever eluded him.

Her look softened. She could understand wanting a thing and taking a fool's chances to get it. She could forgive him for that. He opened his hands and made her a gift of the sun. "It was beautiful, Jeanette. It was bigger than I'd remembered and made a bright rose-colored glow. The rose was just starting to turn orange when I had to run away. I was nearly blind for three days. All I could see was that glow." His explanation trailed away, lost for words.

Jeanette did not look at him. She was fingering the picture--still carefully by its frame--like a keepsake forgotten, a memory lost. "I will treasure this, Jean Pierre, forever." Her words were in the old French, the language that they had spoken lifetimes ago when they had both been human. "I will miss you, when you die." She reached out to trace the line of his face. Her fingers moved gently, almost as though she feared he might age under her touch.

He touched her hand, held it still against his face. "For as long as I live..." he stopped. The words seemed like a beggar's promise now. He had once offered her eternity. He turned his head and kissed her wrist again, over the place where the sweet pulse had once been.

"Are you earthbound?" she asked quietly.

"No." He could not release her hand just yet. "I can still fly." Mischief rose in his eyes. "Do you remember..."

"Paris?" Their voices met together and he heard her laugh at last. "And now Monsieur Eiffel has put that dreadful thing in the center of it!"

"You know, I haven't seen it," Nick admitted. "I haven't been home since..." He shrugged in his usual dismissal of the measurements of time. "I must be sure to see her again before..." he came to a halt. Saying a thing could make it happen. "Before very long."

After a last, light touch on the palm of her hand, he released her. "Perhaps we could see it together."



"The City of Lights?" There was a doubtful curve to her raised eyebrow.

He smile apologetically. "San Francisco, then? Have you seen the lights of the city from over the ocean at night?"

"Show me." Jeanette held her hand out as she would have centuries ago to accept an invitation to dance.

Nick responded to her gesture as he would have then, taking her hand lightly and brushing the fingers gently with a kiss. "A memory then for my old age."

He had spoken carelessly, but her grip tightened. "Will you remember, Jean Pierre, when you are an old man, sleeping in the sun?"

He met her fearful look and held it. "I will remember until the day I die." He opened his hand, freeing her to return her acceptance.

Her wry smile curled one side of her mouth again. She rested her hand lightly in his. "C'est la vie."

He neatly turned and stepped forward with their linked hands held between them in a manner that had been very fashionable when they had last been at court. "Besides, I am not dead yet."

Her step faltered out of time with his. "But I am."

As Nick looked back at Jeanette, he saw the distance that was beginning to separate them. This time, he held on to her, brought her closer as he drew toward himself the arm that was linked to hers.

Nick raised her captured hand and cradled it against his cheek, and turned his head to press the touch of a human kiss against her palm. He moved lower, to touch her wrist, over the old scars that would never quite fade, with the firmer pressure of teeth against the skin. He stopped for her permission.

"Always the gentleman," she said in the old mocking tone. She stepped into his arms and touched a soft, human kiss to the hollow of his throat.

"The grave's a fine and private place," she whispered to him as she touched another kiss to a sensitive spot just under the jawline, "but none, I think, do there embrace."

She kissed him again, as no human would, with a strike in the soft flesh of his throat. There was some pain, as there had always been whenever the circumstance brought them together, but Nick did not pull away. He understood that she wanted something to remember him by. He hoped that she, in turn, would understand when she tasted of his heart.

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Doctor Brittington traced his way carefully through the museum, this time by himself. Nick had been unusually quiet since the night of the party, so Jack had decided to do a little follow-up of his own. He took a quick reference from the sculptures to either side and turned on his heel to face the wall where the painting of the wild hunt had been hanging.

It was gone. In its place was a much smaller, framed portrait flanked by two tapestries from the Medieval collection. Evidently, the museum had accepted some other piece.

Jack moved in closer to examine the painting. The description plaque said only that it was titled "M'Amour" and painted by an artist whose name seemed vaguely familiar to him.

The subject was a woman, seated in a languid pose and dressed in an antique froth of lace and velvet. There was some background, but it showed only as indistinct and shadowed shapes around the central figure. The woman herself was a delicate beauty favored with ebony hair, snow-white skin, and blood-red lips. By some trick of the painting, the focus of her vision was set to something just behind the observer, something that captured her attention and gave her a secret reason to smile.

# Hero

by Rebecca Morris

The young woman lay in her bed, drowsing, her black hair spread out on the pillow. Her hair, dyed in the punk mode, made her already fair skin appear pearly white. Her nails were painted a deep red, the color of blood, and her silky nightgown was black. Almost time to get up now. She worked the graveyard shift and wasn't due in until midnight, but just like the day folk, she had her errands to run, and a house to clean. She lay, eyes closed, half-asleep. It was early yet--3:00 p.m.--when the alarm clock sounded. She hit the snooze button and permitted herself to fall back to sleep. The next time she awoke, she realized she was not alone in the apartment, not in the bedroom, not even in her own bed. She opened her eyes. Kneeling above her in the bed was a man, one knee on either side of her slim torso. He had a long wooden stake in his hands. She felt the point of it on her left breast. Before she had time to scream, time to register the pain, he had driven it into her chest with a wooden mallet. She heard his words, "Die! Where are your immortal powers now, bitch?" She tried to scream, but her mouth filled with blood as the aorta was pierced. Within seconds she was no longer conscious, and she was unaware of the further indignities visited upon her body.

Detective Nicholas Knight of the Toronto P.D. pulled the dark green Cadillac into the parking garage of the upscale apartment complex whose address had been given to him by the dispatcher. His partner, Don Schanke had requested that Nick meet him at the apartment. The detective noticed the van belonging to the forensics team and wondered if his friend, Natalie Lambert, was the active medical examiner for the evening. He got out of the car and rode the elevator to the seventh floor. It was obvious from the crowd of people standing around the apartment door, which one was the crime scene. As he walked toward the congested doorway, his partner stepped out and grinned.

"You're gonna love this one, Knight!" Schanke turned back toward the apartment door, "It is the weirdest, bloodiest thing I've seen in a while. You may want to wait for the report, Nick. There's a hell of a lot of gore in there."

"Thanks, Schanke, I think I can handle it." His partner was not exaggerating. The metallic tang of blood filled nostrils even before he entered the door. Surely even the mortals in the room noticed the scent. He vaguely recalled the battlefields of his mortal days. The blood-lust of those days was bad enough. He felt a tingle in his gums, as his vampiric incisors demanded his attention, warning him of their intention to make an appearance. The handkerchief from his pocket, held to his face, served the dual purpose of disguising the fangs and filtering out the worst of the blood smell. He crossed the living room, then, taking a deep breath, entered the bedroom. On the bed was the body of a young woman, clothed in a black silk sheath. The line of the bodice was spoiled by the wooden



stake protruding from her chest. The spray pattern on the ceiling and bed evinced the profusion of blood which had spewed from the chest wound. The bed was spattered with dark gouts and streaks. Her hair fanned out long and dark on the pillow, but her face was not serene in sleep. The lips pulled back in a rictus of fear and pain. Two inches below the jaw line, was a gap, the head no longer attached to the neck. Small whitish pellets filled the space. Still holding the white linen square in front of his mouth, Nick leaned down closer, but was quickly repulsed by the odor. "Garlic! Those are peeled cloves of garlic!" Nick turned to face his partner.

Schanke grinned. "Looks like somebody thought our girl here was a vampire." As usual he bantered his morbid wit to cover any discomfort at the sights he saw every day as a police officer.

Nick swallowed hard. "Uh, yeah, looks like." He fled the bedroom with Schanke trailing him. In the living room he found Nat removing the latex gloves she had worn for a preliminary examination of the body. "What do you think, Nat?"

"About what?"

"Last night's hockey match. What do you think?"

Nat's attention was piqued. Her friend was not inclined to sarcasm, except those times when he was really upset. "Nick, I'm sorry. It looks like something out of a Bela Lugosi movie, doesn't it? The victim has been dead about four hours, but I can probably pin it down closer in the lab. She was already dead when the perp decapitated her."

Nick turned to Schanke. "What do we know about the victim?"

His partner pulled a small notebook from his pocket and read his notes. "Let's see. Her name is MaryAnne Hennessey. Date of birth: May 10, 1970. She lived in this apartment for three years. The manager says she was a good tenant, paid her rent on time, wasn't too demanding. He says she worked nights for some high tech computer corp. All in all, she seemed pretty ordinary."

Nick noticed an ash tray on an end table and a book of matches sitting in it. "She smokes, or knows someone who does." Surreptitiously he slid the matches into his pocket. "Do we have any known associates, boyfriend, so forth?" asked Nick.

"Not yet," Schanke answered. "The neighbor says that she has heard a man's voice, but never seen him. The neighbor was probably at work when the murder took place."

"Well, I haven't even logged in yet this evening. I'd best go do that." Nick turned to Nat. "You want a ride back?"

Nat retrieved her medical bag. "I'd be grateful. I hate to admit it, but I really don't like riding around in the meat wagon."

There was little conversation until Nick and Natalie reached the car. Suddenly Nick slammed his palms against the car door angrily. "Damn! Another false security destroyed. It was a comfort to believe that in this century mortals are too rational to even believe in vampires; hence, no vampire hunters."

Natalie got into the car and looked at Nick. "You really think it was a vampire hunter?"

Nick shrugged. "It certainly looks like whoever killed her followed the old folk lore. Did you notice; the stake was ash?"

"But why would someone have believed she was a vampire? She looked like a pretty normal twenty-three-year old to me."

Nick shrugged again. He pulled the book of matches from his jacket pocket. "Guilt by association maybe." On the red cover was a black bird poised for flight. The name, "The Raven," was imprinted across it.

Natalie gasped, "Someone knows about the Raven. What else does this someone know?"

For a third time, Nick shrugged. "I don't know, but I think maybe our survival depends on finding out."

The ride to the station was accomplished in silence. Both Nick and Natalie were deep in thought about the possibilities implied by this case.

At his desk, Nick filled out the appropriate reports, and pondered the case. When Schanke arrived, Nick looked up. "Anyone contacted next of kin?"

Schanke nodded. "Yeah, they're in a little burg in Saskatchewan. We contacted the department there. They'll be telling them. I'm glad I don't have that duty this time."

"Yeah." Knight returned to his paperwork.

Later that shift, Nick and Don were ordered to investigate the corpse of a petty hood known to be an informant about mob activity. Joey Lombardo was no Al Capone, but he knew enough of the local gangster muscle that he had been able to buy his way out of a jail term by giving Knight and Schanke the information they needed to arrest and convict one of the soldiers. They had been grateful at the time, but now were dispassionate as they stood over Joey's body in a dark alley, the apparent victim of a mob enforcement.

The next evening it was business as usual: Nick and Schanke were disagreeing rather loudly over whether or not to interview Joey Lombardo's widow who worked at the PussyCat Club. Captain Stonetree watched the bustle with his usual air of self-satisfied bemusement and was about to interrupt them when Nick and Schanke were silenced mid-shout as Natalie walked in. Nick's mouth formed a silent whistle, though Schanke was less subtle. A long wolf whistle and delighted grin evidenced his appreciation of her unusual outfit.

She protested with mock annoyance. "Stop it! I'll have both of you up on sexual harassment charges."

"Come on, Nat," Nick smiled sweetly. "We just admire the change. To what do we owe this?" The doctor wore a turquoise chiffon confection reaching to mid-calf, leaving shoulder and back deliciously bare, accessorized with silver-strap evening sandals and a matching bag. "You must admit, it's not your usual style."

"No!" She twirled around to show off the outfit and returned his smile. "No, I've been out dancing."

Schanke grinned. "New beau? Finally found someone to put samurai warrior here on his toes?"

Nat blushed, avoiding Nick's eyes. "Not exactly new. I met him at the Hematologists Conference last month. I'm just seeing a bit more of him now. In fact, I'm having an open house next week for all my friends to meet him." She gestured toward Nick. "No excuses, I've already checked the duty roster. You're off. And, Schanke," she turned to the dark-haired detective, "I've already talked to Myra, so you're coming, too."

Nick spoke for them. "We'll be there. Just tell us when, where, and what to bring."

"Thanks, Nick. Charles is on sabbatical from Edinburgh. The only people he's met so far in 'the colonies' are hematologists."

"And you're going to broaden his horizons by introducing him to cops?" Nick shook his head in mock bemusement.

"Just be there, gentlemen!" She flounced out of the room in a swell of green-blue chiffon.

"Schanke! Knight!" Captain Stonetree shouted from outside his office door. "Natalie's found something on the Lombardo autopsy. You two go down and see if she's got anything that'll help."

Nick stood and straightened the line of his silk jacket.

"You look eager," Schanke observed sarcastically. "Working on that debonair look of yours?"

"Yeah. Proud of me?"

"Yeah. Speaking of debonair types, what do you think of Nat's new beau?"

"Don't know. Haven't met the man yet." Nick headed for the elevator.

Schanke pushed the down button, then turned to face Nick. "I'm accustomed to thinking of you two as a couple, but, I sure as hell don't know why, since both of you go out of your way to deny it."

Nick smiled at this sign of protectiveness, rare in his macho partner.

"I keep telling you that we're close friends. I'd give my life for her, and I think she for me. Lovers are a dime a dozen." He frowned slightly, "I gotta admit...I do miss the time."

They got off the elevator and entered the M.E.'s office. Nat hunched over a microscope behind a chastely-draped corpse on the examining table.

"Hi, guys." She pointed to her 'patient.' "This one's a winner."

"Really." Nick walked past the body. It was a struggle not to notice the sweet smell of blood. "I thought we had a standard mob execution."

"Ah, not so! At first glance, yes." She turned back the cover from the corpse's head. "See the small calibre wounds, back of the head? His hands were cuffed behind him, too, all S.O.P. for a mob hit." Nat noticed Nick turn away and she recovered the body. "What's not obvious is that he was raped."

"Raped!" Schanke grimaced. "What the hell? That's not the way those boys do it."

Nat shrugged, "There's bruising in the genital area, tearing of the rectum, sperm in the rectum. It's all consistent with sexual assault. Either this boy is into some very unsafe sex or, he was raped." She looked up to



address Nick and realized that he had covered his mouth with his hand. "Nick, are you okay?"

"No!" Ne bent over and clutched his stomach. "I'm going into your office." Stumbling forward, he grabbed the door.

"Inspector Knight! Don't you dare vomit on my carpet. Use the trash can." She turned to Schanke. "I'll clean him up and bring him upstairs. You go ahead."

Don shook his head. "Just when I think he's toughening up. Well, some folks can handle life's little unpleasantnesses and others can't."

Smiling slightly at his unconscious irony, Natalie ushered Schanke from the room.

He turned back at the door. "I'll tell the others that you two wanted to be alone."

"Go! Scat!" She pushed him out, then dashed back to the closed door of her personal office.

"Nick! Are you okay? What's going on?" she asked as she entered the room cautiously.

"No, damn it, I'm not okay, Nat, get out of here." His voice echoed hollowly, the sound that Nat had come to associate with the vampire.

"Nick! What the hell's going on?"

He swung around and faced her from behind the desk. His eyes glowed sulphurously, and his fangs were fully extended. They seemed to shine in the fluorescent lighting. "Natalie," he growled, "if you value your life, and/or your soul, get out now."

Unquestioningly, she backed out, bumping against the door, slamming it behind her.

It seemed as though hours had passed. Natalie paced, stopped to peer in the microscope, checked the cadaver to see if she could find one more detail. The door behind her opened. She swung about to see Nick as he emerged from her office. He smiled shakily, straightening his shirtfront.

"Hi, Nat," he murmured weakly.

"Hi, Nat! Is that all you have to say to me? Damn!" She stood with her hands on her hips, her voice most shrewish. "You scared the shit out of me! In the years I've known you, and I include the very beginning, I have never been so bloody scared."

He combed his hair back with his fingers and leaned wearily against one of the counters with his hip. "Nat, I'm sorry. I didn't expect...that is...I didn't think..."

"Nick, you're blathering. Didn't expect what? Didn't think what? Damn it, Nick! This time you owe me some answers."

He straightened and walked slowly toward Natalie. "You're right, but there's no easy way to explain it. One of my blood kin, someone I was responsible for bringing over, died. I mean, really died. It's...I guess it's like losing a child, except we feel it physically."

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*A darkly cloaked man stands in a town square. The sun has set. Starkly illuminated stakes still smoldered. His face contorts. The rising*

*casts shadows. Teeth gleam. He snarls soundlessly. How did they enchain his kinsmen? He hears again the screams that in his dreams had awakened him. He strides to the pyres and sees the chains, the hated symbol carved on each link.*

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Nick shook his head as if to dispel old griefs. "A grieving vampire parent is not a pretty sight."

"I'm sorry, Nick." Her hand rested on his sleeve. "Who was it?"

He shrugged. "I don't really know. I've only got two or three left. Monique is the only one here in Toronto. I'll go check at the Raven."

He moved toward the door. "By the way, for the record, this pretty much confirms the motive in the Hennessey case; though how in hell we're going to present this information is beyond me, Nat."

The Raven before midnight was relatively quiet. Nick walked through the doors and glanced from left to right. Even given his passionate desire to be human again, Nick couldn't help but feel some comfort at being in a room where the undead outnumbered the living. He extended his senses and noted that no one around him seemed especially hungry or upset. He opened himself yet more and tested the air for the sense of his own vampiric offspring, for Monique. There was no sign, no taste of her in the air. Janette approached him. He smiled warmly.

"Bon soir, Janette." He drew her to himself for a quick kiss on the cheek.

She drew back in some surprise. "Bon soir, Nicholas. You are in a very mellow mood tonight."

"Yes, I am." He held her hands and scanned the room. "Have you seen Monique this evening?"

"Monique?" She frowned. "Are you planning at last to take up your responsibilities again, my Nicholas?"

He shook his head. "Don't push, ma cheri. One of my blood kin died this evening. I felt it."

"Don't be foolish. It couldn't have been Monique." She turned and picked up the wine glass from the table behind her. "Monique is not the suicidal type. What could sneak up on her after the sun has set? The mortals don't even believe in us anymore, and if they did, they could only attack us during daytime. What of your other 'children'? Are any of them in daylight now?"

Nick turned so that Janette could not see his face. "You know, I have lost track of most of them. As far as I know, there are only three still surviving and Monique tracked me down here in Toronto, not vice versa."

Janette reached up and gently turned Nick's face back to her. "Nicholas, why do you torture yourself so? The parent-child relationship is more than sacred among us, it is part of our being. You cannot cut yourself off from that any more than the mortals can stop breathing. Nicholas, mon cher." She stroked the cheek lightly. "Your last two children died at your own hands. Your father, my father, LaCroix, forced you to destroy him. I think maybe he planned that all along, you were his

tool to end his life when he became bored with it. Still, my dear, we cannot divorce ourselves from this relationship, even though it causes so much pain."

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*Again he hears the screams of his children, those he had brought first into this life of death, second to this small Spanish village where the itinerant Inquisitors had been clever enough to destroy them. In his mind's eye he studies them as they sleep. The black-robed monks slip up to their nearly comatose bodies and chain them with the cross-carved links. He hears his children's shrieks of pain and anger as the crosses burn into their flesh. He feels their frustration and helplessness. He stands in the plaza, staring at the now empty stakes. His rage and pain grows, drowning the humanity he has tried to retain.*

"I know that, Janette. If Monique comes by, have her call me, okay?" Nick kissed her lush mouth and left the club.

Nick stretched in his bed and felt his energy levels rise as the sun set. He glanced at the answering machine on the table beside his bed and noted the blinking light. He pressed the retrieval button, then smiled at Nat's cheerful voice.

"Don't you dare forget, Detective Knight! My house, 7:30. Dress nice. I really need your support. Thanks, Nick." Click.

She had, indeed, decided to invite every cop in the city, or at least all of them from their precinct. He barely recognized some of the ones who typically worked days. Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself, though Nick thought that the twenty-five or so crowded into the apartment were a bit too close for comfort. He could smell the pungent tang of blood from each one and he felt his hunger rising as well. The plate of food in his hand did nothing to assuage that hunger and the black and white cat at his feet was getting the better part of the plate's contents. He looked toward the door to see Schanke and his wife standing with Natalie and a stranger. He set the plate down where the cat could reach it without being seen by too many guests and joined the couples at the entryway.

"Nick!" Natalie excitedly pulled Nick closer. "Don and Myra, and Charles, all showed up at the same time!"

"So, we get to meet the mystery man." He smiled at the unfamiliar gentleman and held out his right hand. "I'm Nick Knight."

The man coolly took Nick's proffered hand. "Good evening, Inspector Knight. Natalie's told me so much about you."

Nick glanced at Natalie and wondered, for an instant, just how much was 'so much'. Her slightly hurt response to his unspoken suspicion was obvious to him, though no one else seemed to notice.

"We've heard a great deal about you, too. Charles Buckingham, isn't it?" At the other's nod, Nick continued. "I knew some Buckinghams once. I confess they were a bit too 'royalist' for my taste, Dr. Buckingham."



"Well, yes, the Buckingham's were Jacobites one and all, and I'm afraid even with the German on the throne, we remain staunch Tories," he replied.

Natalie winced, aware that Nick was probably referring to the Jacobite Buckingham's of pre-Revolutionary days. "Charles, this is Myra Schanke." She turned the man's attention to the small dark-haired woman standing with them in the foyer, "and Detective Sergeant Don Schanke. He and Nick are partners."

Charles Buckingham looked Schanke up and down, offered his hand with a condescending smile. "That's a splendid suit, Detective. One could almost take it for the real thing."

Schanke smoothed a hand down the front of his jacket. He was painfully aware of the other man's sarcasm, but was unwilling to continue the confrontation. "Thank you, I take pride in my wardrobe."

Natalie looked from one to the other, alarmed at the hostility she felt among the three. She forced a seemingly calm smile. "Myra, Don, I don't think you've seen my apartment." She took Myra by the elbow and steered the couple from the foyer. As they walked off, Nick heard Natalie ask Myra about the new line of Pretty Face sunscreens. Nick found himself in the foyer with Charles Buckingham. The doctor smiled conspiratorially, "Quite a clothes horse, your partner."

Nick ignored the remark and changed the subject. "Natalie tells us you're on leave from Edinburgh. How do you find life on this side of the 'pond'?"

"Quite nice actually. I'm afraid even today, we in Britain tend to think of Canada as 'the frontier'. It was a pleasure to find it so civilized." He moved toward the wet bar set up on Natalie's kitchen counter. "May I get you a drink?"

Nick bristled at Charles' usurpation of the host's role. He shook his head negatively. "No, thank you." It was impossible to find a suitable conversational opening. He was also blind to what Natalie saw in this man. Charles Buckingham was physically attractive. He appeared to be approximately forty-five years old and he seemed in good shape, his body rather lean and lanky. Yet, he was a snob of the first order, something Nick knew that Natalie disliked intensely. As if on cue, Natalie rejoined them. "I left Myra selling Pretty Face to Inspector Forchewife. Nick, did I tell you how I met Charles?" she asked.

"Something about the hematology conference, wasn't it?"

Charles smiled and lifted Natalie's hand to his lips. "Yes, I was facilitating one of the recreational panels, and Natalie walked in. She's the only one who took the scenario seriously."

"You would have enjoyed it, Nick. It was a 'what if'. The facilitators set up improbable situations and the participants brainstorm the consequences. 'What if the Mongol Horde had not brought bubonic plague to Europe? or 'What if the American Indians had immigrated across the Bering Strait after measles hit the Asian continent?'"

Trying not to notice that the British hematologist still held Natalie's hand, Nick smiled, "and what was your scenario, Charles?"

"You may find it ridiculous, but...what if vampires really existed? Natalie was wonderful. Of course, the whole blood-born pathogen was the favorite theory. Nat was very good at explaining most of the symptoms mentioned in folklore as the result of a viral infection. But, I really like the magical/religious explanations myself."

Natalie retrieved her hand and spoke to Nick. "Charles is multi-talented. He holds a masters degree in anthropology, with a specialization in mythological folk-lore of Europe." She turned to Charles, "but I still don't like your magical/religious explanations. They leave no room for a 'cure' or even any hope for the victim. Your theory makes a study of the problem useless. And if there are only magical rules, what's the point in trying to figure them out?"

As Nick studied Natalie, he understood what she had seen in the doctor. She was looking for more information to help him. He decided to see if Charles knew anything that could help him become mortal. He looked at her, trying to convey his gratitude for her efforts, then spoke. "Magical does not have to mean inconsistent, Nat. There are some fairly universal magical principles."

Charles drew back in surprise. "Detective! I had no idea that law enforcement officers were so well versed."

Nick tried to sound nonchalant. "I guess Nat didn't tell you, but archeology is a hobby-horse of mine. I like knowing the meaning of the pieces I've collected."

Natalie interrupted. "Wait a minute, gentleman! I still don't see how proposing a magical explanation for vampirism helps its victims." She turned to Charles. "Specifically, how do you cure it, vampirism, I mean?"

Charles casually scratched his nose as he pondered the question. "Well, first of all, we do need to define, 'what is a vampire?'. If it's a separate species, as some of the speculative fiction on the subject would lead us to believe, then you can't 'cure' it. On the other hand," Charles warmed to his subject, adopted the professional manner that Nick was certain drove his students to distraction. "On the other hand, if vampirism is a curse from God, or vampires are the 'spawn of hell', as Montague Summers implied, the cure would have to be contrition, penance, forgiveness, something like that. If it's magic, you'd have to do magic to cure it. But, Nat, the best cure would probably be a stake through the chest. What vampire would want to be cured? From all the myths, they'd be supermen; at the very least, well nigh immortal, incredibly strong. The hindrances we know of seem minor inconveniences."

Nick and Natalie exchanged looks.

Nick spoke quietly. "What about the dietary requirements? Wouldn't most people object to the need to kill another person every so often?"

"Perhaps," Charles shrugged. "I don't know. As many suicides as we see, it seems as though there is a plethora of people who might consider it a favor to kill them. On the other hand," he gestured to Nick, "It seems like you've encountered enough people who don't find killing other people a problem at all. No," he paused, "magical or damned by God, vampires are very likely evil enough that the concept of murdering humans must not

seem very difficult to them, comparable to humans killing beef cattle or swine. The average mortal's response to the vampire question would have to be: kill it before it could kill you. And as we know, that would not be easy." He shook his head solemnly. "It would take a very special kind of human to be able to accomplish such a task."

"So the bottom line is that there is no cure. Is that what you're saying?" Natalie challenged hotly.

"No." Charles shook his head again. "I'm telling you that except for a rare exception, no one would be able to hold the beast long enough to cure it in the first place. It would be like attempting to cure a serial killer."

Nick stood quietly during the discussion. Although he remained determined to try all avenues, it hurt deeply to hear someone say his goal was impossible. He vividly recalled his own sentiments when he and Natalie had first met. "Is not evil a metaphysical condition?"

Nick rolled his shoulders, "I'm afraid you two are getting too deep for me. If you'll excuse me."

Natalie sadly watched him melt into the crowd. She wished that she had avoided this conversation with Charles while in Nick's company, yet she felt that Charles should be able to help her help Nick. He was a gifted hematologist. He had an extensive knowledge of the folklore about vampires. She turned to Charles and smiled brightly. "Another dilettante bites the dust! Let's go see if there's any food left on the table." She took his arm.

The following evening, after a somewhat unsatisfactory time with the widow Lombardo, the partners arrived at the precinct.

Schanke wrapped his mouth around a gyro sandwich. "I tell you, Nick," he paused to push an errant bit of meat back into his mouth, "that Lombardo dame is lying through her teeth."

Nick tried to discreetly avoid his partner's garlic breath. "Yeah, at the least she should know who picked up her husband."

A uniformed officer intercepted them. "Inspector Knight, there's a woman here to see you." He grinned lasciviously. "A real looker."

"Hmm. Ms. Lombardo changed her mind, do you think?" Nick asked.

"No." Schanke pointed over Nick's shoulder. "It's that friend of yours from the Raven."

Nick swung about to see Janette coming toward him. Although she was heavily veiled, Nick sensed that the vampire was upon her.

"Nicholas, it's CJ," her voice echoed hollowly.

Nick took her arm. "Come with me, Janette." He led her to an interrogation room and checked to make certain the surveillance equipment was shut off.

Janette had removed the hat and veil. Her eyes glowed, fangs extended. She growled as she spoke softly. "Someone has murdered CJ. He was just a baby. You were right: there is a hunter out there. We must find him and destroy him."

"Janette, calme toi." He leaned against the table and watched her as she paced. He was careful to give her space. "When did it happen?"

"Today, as we slept."



"Have you been to his apartment?"

"No," she grimaced. "I know he's dead. I felt it. I could not stand the thought of seeing him still and dead." The vampire began to fade. Her eyes were their more customary deep blue, her full lips were undistorted by the fangs. She sat down in one of the chairs surrounding the table.

Nick moved to sit beside her. "Ma cheri, now you are calmer. Do I know your CJ?"

"Only in passing, I think." She smiled wanly. "He was highly insulted when you gave him hygienic advice. Something about flossing one's teeth."

"That one! He was yours?" Nick shook his head. "Didn't you say something to me once about eight hundred years ago giving one better taste?"

Janette offered a toss of her thick black hair. "I met him while the mortals were having their world war, shortly after you left us in a huff over that child." She looked away. "He was young, virile. Certainly nothing like you, mon brav, but possessed of a certain rough charm. He never quite managed immortality." She turned her face back to Nick, her eyes lambent in her anger. "Now he never will."

Nick pulled her to himself and felt the anger and grief within her. "Give me his address. I'll get a forensics kit and go check it out. Do you know where Monique lived as well?"

Janette handed him a card with an address on it. "No, I do not know where Monique was staying. Here is CJ's though. You know, I never thought we would be grateful for your 'human' inclinations." She reached up and lightly kissed his cheeks. Gathering up her hat and veil, she swept from the room. Nick walked from the interrogation room to his desk where he sat facing Don Schanke.

"Well, what did the wicked witch have to say?"

Nick looked up, surprised. "What?!"

Schanke smiled. "I don't know why, but somehow she's always reminded me of the witch in 'The Wizard of Oz'."

Nick grinned. "Yeah, I see what you mean. She's got an address on a friend of Joey's."

"Well, let's go!" Don grabbed his jacket.

"Whoa, partner. Janette says he'll be at the Raven later on. I'll catch up with him there. I need to talk to Nat about that autopsy. She said she'd have a blood-type on that semen sample yesterday."

Nick entered the morgue with his usual mixed feelings. Nat had suggested he was afraid he belonged there more than anywhere else. He mentally steeled himself and walked into Nat's office. "Hi, Nat. I need a favor."

She looked up from her paper work and smiled. "When didn't you?"

"Well, okay, but this is important. I need to survey a crime scene and can't ask anyone else to help," he told her.

"This sounds suspicious. What's going on?" she demanded.

He leaned against her desk. "Janette came to visit me at the station. She says one of her converts, CJ, has been murdered."

"Nick, let me get my things. I'll help you." She stood and took her jacket from the metal coat rack.

Nick noticed a withdrawal in her, but hadn't a clue why. The drive to the address given by Janette was unduly quiet. He glanced at her, noticed that she had moved further toward the passenger door, away from him. He considered recent conversations and tried to figure out what caused her growing distance. She'd been spending a lot of time with Buckingham lately. Maybe it was as simple as that.

"Nat, if you move any further away, you're going to have to run along beside the car," he forced a tiny smile.

She looked at the seat between them, saw the distance she'd put between herself and her friend. She straightened, but made no effort to slide closer. Nick slowed the car down, checked the address on the piece of paper he held.

"Ah, there it is," he pulled smoothly into a parking space, maneuvering the classic Caddy as if it were a VW. He opened the door for Natalie with courtly grace. She smiled hesitantly, clearly unwilling to converse with him at this moment. Leading the way into the dingy apartment building, Nick checked the mailboxes on the wall. "Here we go, Apartment 5A, CJ Smith. How original. Come on, Janette says the elevator even works." He guided her into the elevator.

"Nick," she put out a hand to stop him. He caught the strong garlic scent. He fell back, gagging.

"I'll meet you up there," she mumbled.

The elevator door opened on the fifth floor and Nat stepped out. She was not surprised to see Nick waiting for her by the apartment door. Natalie set the small satchel down and removed the fingerprinting kit and handed the box to Nick. He brushed the doorknob and lockplate, checked for fingerprints, returned the box to her, all in silence. Nick removed a small case from his coat pocket, utilized the lock pick it held and the door swung open easily. Nick stepped inside quietly. The furniture was ordinary, if somewhat dusty. Nat followed him in and looked around. Unlike Nick's apartment, this one looked as if its tenant spent little time here. There was no art on the wall, no photographs. Nick looked down the short hallway which led to a bathroom and bedroom. He went to the bedroom door and pushed it open without touching the door knob.

"Nat," the voice was strangled. She walked in and shuddered at the scene on the bed. A man's body lay on the bloodied sheets, a stake through his chest, pinning him to the bed. The head, separated from the body, lay on the pillows. The skin was rigored to the bones, the lips pulled back, eye sockets empty. There was the smell of age, of decay, but not that of rotting flesh which Nat had come to associate with day-old corpses. Nick drew close to the bed and stood over the body. He bent closer, without putting his hands on the bed. "This pretty well clinches it. We have a serial killer with a thorough knowledge of vampires. The stake is ash again." His words were terse. "Ash is the preferred killer of vampires in England. There's garlic between head and neck. And five will get you ten, there's either garlic in the mouth, a thorn under the tongue, or both.

Damn! How the hell could this have happened? Damn! Damn! Damn!" He turned his back to the bed and its grisly burden. "Who would have done this? Who could have done this? And why?"

Nat entered the room. She put her hand on Nick's sleeve. "Nick, CJ was a vampire. How many humans has he killed? How many survivors are out there looking to avenge themselves on him?" She looked earnestly into his face, "Nick, we're not talking child murder here."

Visibly pulling himself together, Nick returned her sincerity. "He was a blood-sucking monster, preying on you poor innocent humans, so kill the ravening beast. Is that what you're saying?" He shook her hand off and stalked out of the bedroom, leaving her with the corpse. At the doorway, he hesitated. "You told me that I was still human, that I had feelings, compassion, humanity. This boy only lived our life for fifty years. Surely if anyone should be murdered in his sleep, it's me, not this child." He walked back into the living room. Resignedly, Nat began the forensic examination of the scene. "Nick," her voice was cautious. "Nick, what do we do with the remains?"

He returned to the bedroom. "We take him with us. He'll have to be cremated." Carefully, almost tenderly, he wrapped the dead vampire in the bedspread. "No folks in Saskatchewan waiting for word of their baby. Is that a blessing or a curse?" He gathered up the desiccated corpse, no burden. "I'll take him out the window. You go ahead down to the car. I'll meet you there."

By the time Nat got to the car, Nick was closing the trunk. "I'll drop you off," he said. "Are you going home or back to the precinct?"

She sat quietly for a moment, "Back to the precinct. Charles is picking me up for dinner break. Nick," She turned her body toward him. "Nick, I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean to trivialize Janette's loss, even if I don't quite understand it."

Nick glanced from the corner of his eyes. He smiled ruefully, "It's okay, Nat. We're having the same problem. You don't want to see humans anywhere but at the top of the food chain. I don't like to see 'my kind' as prey."

The drive back to the station, though quiet, was far more companionable than the ride to CJ's apartment. At the curb at the front of the station, Nick asked Nat to make his excuses. He disappeared to dispose of CJ's body.

Nick opened the blinds on his windows, gazing at the darkening sky of early evening. The phone rang just as the door opened to admit Natalie, one of the few mortals he had ever trusted with the keycode to his loft. He retrieved the call holding his hand up to Nat in welcome.

"Nick Knight." He paused, listened. "Yes, Janette, you were correct. I had intended to stop by this evening to tell you." He paused again. "Natalie is helping. So far we don't have anything, but with more than one crime scene, the killer is bound to make a mistake. Give us a little time." He smiled at Natalie. "I'm sorry, ma cheri. We will find who is doing this, trust me. Au revoir." He replaced the telephone. "Well, Nat, any word on the fingerprints yet?"



"Yes and no. There is a set of prints common to both MaryAnne Hennessey's apartment and CJ's. They might be CJ's. They are not on our police net or military service records."

"How about Interpol or U.S. records?"

Natalie shook her head. "Not on file." She moved toward the window to watch the city lights as they came on. "How's Janette taking things?"

Nick replied, "all right, I guess. She was closer to CJ than I to Monique. She takes her responsibilities very seriously. However, he was not her favorite," he smiled. "I think CJ was something of a disappointment to her."

Glancing at her watch, Natalie said, "Shift report in twenty-five minutes, Nick." She faced him. "I've missed you. Charles is nice enough, and I think he's quite fond of me, but I miss our time together."

"Me, too, Nat." Nick glided toward her. "It's been awhile since I've had a friend like you. Maybe never."

Nat slid her arm into his. "Come on, friend, give me a ride to the precinct in that chariot of yours."

The phone rang again. Nick waited for his message to play through. The voice of his partner came on. "Nick, if you're still home, pick up."

Nick answered. "Yeah, Schank, I was just on my way out the door."

"Nick, the evening's fun has already started." He paused. "Looks like we've got a pattern killer on our hands. Ve you seen Nat?"

"Yeah, in fact, she's right here with me."

"Bring her along. Forensics is already here. It's another Hennessey. By the way, tell Nat that her boyfriend is with us."

Schanke gave Nick the address then hung up. Nick's face was grim as he faced Natalie. "Damn unselective vampire hunter. My guess is he's made another mistake."

Natalie looked quizzically, "I think you left out a couple of verses, Nick. What's going on?"

"Sorry, Nat. Our vampire hunter seems to have struck again. Wrong, again. If he'd gotten a real vampire, Schanke would have certainly mentioned some address, let's go." He opened the apartment door, then turned back to Natalie. "By the way, Schanke says your boyfriend is at the crime scene."

"Charles? Whatever for?"

"Don't know. Schanke just said to tell you."

The crime scene was a tangle of police cars. Inside the building, the couple took the elevator and rode up in companionable silence. As at the Hennessey apartment, Nick noticed the blood scent long before they actually got to the apartment. The victim this time had apparently awakened before the killer had attacked. The body was in the living room, soaked in gore. There was a stake through the heart, pushed not quite to the floor. Schanke leaned over the corpse and took notes. When he looked up and saw Nick once again turn away, presumably out of a weak stomach, he stood and said, "Come on, partner, there's nothing new here." He led Nick and Natalie into the victim's kitchen.

Charles stood beside the refrigerator, watching the forensics team go through the apartment. He reached out to Natalie. "My dear! This is incredibly interesting! Does this sort of thing happen often in your line?"

Nick made a small grimace and hoped that no one noticed. Schanke gave a conspiratorial wink. Natalie answered the scientist.

"More often than we like to think about. Charles, this is a murder scene. Should you really be here?" Her tone was harsh.

"Well, when Sergeant Schanke mentioned that it looked like a 'vampire hunter,' you know my interest in the subject. I asked your Captain Stonetree if I could tag along. He was hesitant at first, but...you know my powers of persuasion."

Schanke grabbed Nick by the elbow and led him out of the kitchen. He whispered close to Nick's ear. "Yeah, powers of persuasion all right. He badgered Stonetree 'til the captain said yes just to get rid of him." Straightening up, he gestured around the room. "'Bout the same as last time. The victim's name is Lizabeth Christian. She's 24, white female. Works nights as a clerk in an all night liquor store. Her boyfriend found her, he's down in the manager's office, pretty broken up."

A quick study of the living room, prompted Nick to observe, "Something else's the same as last time. The MO looks like something out of Bram Stoker, but the victim doesn't look much like a vampire." He stalked back into the kitchen and pulled open the cabinet doors. "Look at this," he gestured toward the cabinet. "A whole jar of garlic. You think Dracula cooked with garlic?" He opened the refrigerator, "You think Dracula would have a kitchen full of food?" He shook his head, "A stupid van Helsing?" Nick prowled around the apartment, stopping at the bookshelves and CD case.

"She reads, but nothing too heavy." He tipped one out. "Look at this, nutrition books. Do you suppose vampires have to watch their vitamin intake?" He put it back and tipped another, "Or protein complementarity for vegetarians?" He moved to the CD case. "Her taste in music seems pretty specific: Nine Inch Nails, Nirvana, Ministry." He moved on. "Chacun en son goute."

Charles looked around the kitchen, noticed the items which Nick pointed out and frowned. "I don't know. If there was such a creature as a vampire, don't you think it would be clever enough to assume 'protective coloration'?"

Schanke made a brain-stirring gesture with his hand behind Charles' back. A commotion in the living room drew everyone's attention. A nicely-dressed older couple came in. The woman threw herself beside the female form enclosed in a dark body bag.

"No! Lisa! My baby!" The woman was nearly hysterical. She brushed off the hands of the man who tried to help her to rise to her feet. Natalie approached and put her hands on the woman's shoulders.

"Mrs. Christian?" She spoke calmly, but firmly, demanding the woman attend to her, rather than the poor dead girl in the bag. "Mrs. Christian, come away, please."

Nick and Schanke watched with admiration as Natalie calmed the hysterical woman. The man, also distraught, took his wife in his embrace. The two eased onto the sofa, their backs now to their daughter. Charles silently observed.

Nick sat down in the chair opposite the grieving couple. "Mr. and Mrs. Christian?"

The man nodded. "Yes. Lisa's fiance called us. God, how could such a thing happen? Who would murder Lisa like that?"

Nick remembered his own murdered kin. "I don't know, Mr. Christian, but we intend to find out. Had you and your daughter talked recently?"

Mrs. Christian nodded. "She called me almost every morning. We worried about her job." The woman broke down, clutching her husband's coat. "It never occurred to us she would be murdered in her own home."

Nick watched the older couple, almost envying them their grief. It was something they shared in their old age. "Had she mentioned anything unusual to you? Was she worried about anything? A fight with her fiance, someone at work, anything?"

Mr. Christian shook his head. "No, she was pretty delighted with her life. The wife and me, we didn't always like the crowd she hung around with. She was into that 'punk music' stuff. But she was a woman grown, and we remembered how our parents felt when we were doing the jitterbug and things like that. There's no one who would want to kill a flower like her, is there?"

"I don't know, Mr. Christian." Nick pulled one of his cards from his wallet and handed it to the older man. "If you think of anything that might help, or you just want to know what's going on with the case, feel free to call. I work nights, but there's always someone there to take a message."

Nick quickly exited the apartment, followed by his partner and by Natalie, Charles Buckingham in their wake.

"Do you really believe all that 'innocent flower' nonsense from those people?" Charles sneered.

"Why not? Just because a woman is in the punk scene, doesn't imply lack of virtue." Natalie hotly responded. "Those were her parents, Charles. They obviously loved her very much." She turned to Nick, "Do you think our killer is some sort of sicko, or does he really think he's killing vampires?"

"Maybe both." Schanke answered. "I don't know much about this vampire shtick, but he seems to have gone to a lot of trouble to at least make us think he thinks he's killing vampires."

"Why shouldn't he?" Charles interrupted. "Humans have believed in vampires much longer than they have disbelieved. Maybe your killer is a gypsy, or an Eastern European. They have the best memory of the times when we all believed in vampires." He took on an arrogant air.

"Gentlemen, may I volunteer my services as a sort of folk-lorist in residence? I do have a more than passing acquaintance with the myths, as well as with the cultures that promulgated them. Whoever did this horrible deed is clearly also well informed. Natalie mentioned she'd found



a thorn under the tongue of your first victim. That's a Baltic region method for protecting the future victims of the vampire in case the exorcism doesn't work."

"Thanks for the offer, Charlie," Don said sarcastically, "we may need to take you up on it. For now, though, we'll proceed like any other homicide investigation."

"Very well." Charles offered his arm to Natalie. "May I take you for a cup of coffee before you get to work on this one, my dear?"

Natalie smiled at Charles, then turned to Nick and Schanke. "Can you boys do without me for a bit?" She took Charles' arm, and together they left the crime scene.

Back in his car, Nick tapped gently on the steering wheel. Lizabeth Christian was no vampire, any more than MaryAnne Hennessey had been. Nick would have recognized the smell or feel, even if they had been newly brought over vampires. But MaryAnne Hennessey either frequented the Raven or knew someone who did, and Lizabeth Christian liked the kind of music played at the Raven. They were both about the same apparent age as CJ and Monique. Janette knew everyone in her club. If Misses Hennessey or Christian had been there more than once, Janette would know. He turned the keys in the ignition and moved off.

Nick walked into the Raven, sensing again the number of vampires. In pastimes, two or three together were the maximum that could stay together for any length of time. It was the old predator-prey ratio problem. Today, with the availability of 'bottled blood', more could congregate together without competing for prey. He marveled again at how comfortable he felt in this environment. He had spent the better part of the last two centuries to get away from LaCroix and Janette, yet now he found himself relaxed. He smiled as lovely Janette approached him. He took her hands and kissed her fingers and allowed himself a ride on the wave of warm emotions. Encouraged, she pulled her hands from his. Her hands glided to his buttocks. She drew him closer and let her head fall back when he nuzzled her throat. His hands roamed down her body, explored the textures of her skin, dress, hair. The firmness of her slender arms, the soft fullness of her breasts. He heard a deep growl, felt his fangs prick her neck. He drew himself up as he realized the growl came from himself. He pulled back. "Janette, I am sorry."

"Sorry?" She smiled seductively. "Mon Nickola, it has been some time since I have enjoyed your passion."

"Yes," he replied, "but we were never quite so public."

"Nonsense, we're all friends here."

He moved a little away from her, took her by the elbow, and led her to one of the more secluded booths. "Actually, it's your friends who brought me here." He sat beside her. "Did you know a MaryAnne Hennessey or a Lizabeth Christian?"

Janette looked pensive for a moment, then replied. "Yes, they both came in the club not infrequently. MaryAnne was a friend of CJ's. In fact, he was thinking of converting her. I confess," she paused, "I was not terribly encouraging. I do not believe it was jealousy or possessiveness."

He simply was not ready for the responsibilities. She lacked the control to manage our powers."

"She's dead," Nick stated bluntly. Knowing Janette's attitudes toward mortals, he was not terribly surprised by her casual shrug. "She had an ash stake driven through her heart. As did Christian."

Janette excitedly responded, "Our hunter!" She drew a quick breath, "He has made an error, n'est pas?"

"Yeah," Nick nodded, "The police are involved now. This may create difficulties for us."

"Hmmm, give the mortals the right ideas you mean?"

He nodded again. "Or the Enforcers a reason to 'visit'."

She was thoughtful. "Is this the time that I should tell you I am being watched?" She smiled at his shock. "Maybe not, mon vieux."

"How do you know, Janette?"

She pulled her fingers through her raven waves. "I have heard him in the shadows. He is very sly, this one. He is very clever. But you, my champion, you can catch him out, c'est vrai?"

He lifted her fingertips to his lips, "You know I would protect you with my life. Or kill you myself."

"I think we are safe for today. He's already killed once."

"Do you suppose he is aware that he made a mistake with MaryAnne and Lizabeth?"

Nick shook his head. "I don't know. He's very knowledgeable about legend, but mortals have a wide variety of legends about how we die. Then, too, he may be like our countryman, Simon de Montfort, 'kill them all, God will know his own'." He caressed her hand. "I do have a plan and it involves Natalie. I think she will be more willing to help us now that our hunter is making mistakes."

Janette sneered. "Your little friend is not so compassionate with our kind?"

He appeared pensive. "Perhaps not, but I think she will help none the less." He kissed the hand he still held, "Au revoir."

Natalie's well-lit lab had its usual effect on Nick. He, perhaps more than others, was very aware of the mortality of human kind and the morgue brought that home to him. The smells of death surrounded him, the tang of blood wafted everywhere, and yet he was comfortable here. He knew he could trust Natalie, and no one else in the morgue cared whether he was vampire or mortal. He wore a smile as he sat next to her as she worked at her computer terminal.

"I miss you, Nat."

"Miss me?" Nat offered a startled smile. "Where have I been?"

"Would I be branded as jealous if I said 'with Charles'?" Her smile widened, the answer clearly pleased her. "Considering that we have both been insisting that ours is not a romantic relationship, yes. But it's kind of flattering. Now," she became more business-like, "to what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

"As always, I need a favor. Janette figures she's our hunter's next target. If he's as smart as he thinks he is, he won't try to take her at night."

He'll come at high noon and she'll be unable to awaken in time to save herself. I want you to guard her as she sleeps."

Natalie laughed. "You've got to kidding! Me and Janette? Does she know about this?"

"Partly. I told her I had a plan to capture the killer. Realistically, we've got to know more about him before we can capture him, but I don't want Janette endangered. I can hardly ask the captain for a safe-house for her."

Natalie flicked off her terminal screen. "Nick, have you thought about what we're going to do with him once we catch him? Maybe," she paused, looked down at her hands, then looked Nick. "I keep thinking that he sees himself as justified in his actions."

Nick stood up and walked to the far side of the room. He swung back toward her. "Of course, he sees himself as justified! Jeffrey Dahmer saw himself as justified. I thought you were teaching me about being human again. Is it human to drive a stake through someone's heart, to chop her head off?"

Natalie examined her fingernails intently, nervously.

"Nick, you know how I feel about you. But most vampires are, by their nature, killers. How many fathers or lovers or sons owe you for the killing of their child, wife, mother?" Her head jerked up. She dreaded the pain she knew would be in his face. It came as she expected. He turned away. His voice, when he spoke was rough with unshed tears, tears he had not, nor could not shed, for the past eight hundred years.

"I know. Don't you think it's occurred to me to try to extinguish the species myself?" He faced her slowly, "but murder is murder. I understand revenge as a motive. I've had a lot longer to work at it than most."

He became lost in memory.

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*The dark cloaked man stood in the rectory of the Dominican abbey. Around him lay the carnage, the black cassocked priests of the Inquisition against his children were now blackened with the thick ribbons of blood from their savaged throats. Two others stood with him. A woman, terrible in her dark, smiling beauty and a fair-haired man, also smiling. In the corner knelt the last priest. He prayed under a crucifix for salvation in this world, unaware that he has been saved as much by the predator's disgust at his own excess, as by the crucifix hanging over his head. The fair-haired man pointed out the survivor. "You've missed one." But the other ignored him, trembling, his rage spent.*

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In the cold sterility of the lab, he shuddered with the memory. "I know revenge. But I do not want to die as a vampire. Do we let this hunter continue? Does he take Janette next, then me? Are you asking us to allow ourselves to be exterminated?"



It was Natalie's turn. "I hear what you're saying, Nick. I can't stand the thought of losing you to death or to this argument. I can't stand the thought of innocents like MaryAnne Hennessey or Elizabeth Christian being killed. But still," she tried to reason, "there is some justification for mortals to fear and want to exterminate creatures who prey on us."

Nick stood and walked to the door. "Natalie, you humans have been trying to exterminate us for millennia. It hasn't worked yet. I don't think this new hunter is going to succeed where others before him failed. You need to decide if you are going to help us, help me, protect us all, from this killer." He fled the lab.

He was at his desk, staring at the empty report form in his typewriter when a soft cough behind him caught his attention.

Natalie looked waif-like, a little lost and hurt. He passively permitted her to take his arm and scurry him to one of the interrogation rooms.

"You're right, Nick. Murder is murder. Whether the victim is twenty or two hundred. 'Equal protection under the law'." She was sincere and penitent.

Nick embraced Natalie, held her close. "I put you in a quandary sometimes, don't I?"

He released her, then he urged her to sit at the table. He sat beside her. "Can you guard Janette during the day?"

"I suppose, but I still don't think either of us is going to have much fun at this jammie party," she admitted. "How long are we going to need to do this, do you think?"

"I'm not sure," Nick said. "We just don't know enough about the hunter. We don't have any physical evidence, do we?"

"No," she agreed. "No fingerprints that we can I.D., no blood that doesn't belong to the victims. I wish we could have had forensics go over CJ's apartment, too."

"Well, we can't. So, for now we wait. Come on." He put his hand under her elbow. "We probably have the rest of the shift convinced we're enjoying a 'quickie' in here." She laughed.

As they left the interrogation room and walked toward the elevators, Nick noted Charles Buckingham approach the front door. He turned to greet Charles, aware that his smile was more aggressive than friendly. "Hello, Charles. Slumming?"

The other man stopped, eying the closeness between Nick and Natalie. He returned Nick's smile with mock sincerity. "No, actually I was hoping to take Natalie to dinner. I believe it is time for her dinner break." He tapped his watch.

"Yes, Charles, it is." She turned to Nick, "Join us? We're just going to the snack bar down the block."

Nick felt Charles willing him to say no, but a feeling of perversity rose in him. Without thinking about how he would have to explain why he didn't eat, he heard himself accept the invitation. "I'd be delighted. Maybe Charles can help me out with some theories about our 'van Helsing'."

In the small, crowded snack bar, Nick watched as Nat and Charles tore into the greasy cheeseburgers and fries. The place was famous. Nick

had an insignificant plate of french fries in front of him, and was trying to repeat his success of several months past when he had been trying the Twelve-Step Method. His lack of success to force himself to take a bit of the greasy offering made him regret the impulse that had led him to accept Nat's invitation. He toyed with the food, and addressed the scientist. "So, Charles, have you had any inspirations about our murderer?"

Charles genteelly wiped his mouth with a napkin before answering. "Well, no, not really, but I have had a thought." He paused and swallowed. "Consider if vampires really existed," he held his hands up to ward off the expected protests and in so doing missed the look exchanged between Nat and Nick. "I know it sounds insane, but if there were such a thing, if the two young women killed lately were vampires, would we be looking for a criminal, or a hero? Think about it. If vampires are half what legend says, such a man would have to be extremely intelligent, strong, courageous."

"A vigilante," Natalie interjected bitterly. "You're assuming that if these vampires existed, they ought to be fair game without benefit of due process."

"Natalie," Charles' voice was condescending. "We are speaking about blood-sucking monsters here, not humans. Do vampires enjoy the same rights under law as any subject of the crown? I mean, really, next you'll be claiming civil liberties for sharks or tigers."

"As a matter of fact," Nick spoke, "I believe Nat does contribute to the World Wildlife Fund. Most of us would agree that sharks and tigers have the right not to be hunted to extinction. I find your comparison of vampires to predators very interesting. Maybe that's why humans find vampires so terrifying. They always have had problems with predators more aggressive and more clever than they are. But, Charles," he focussed on Buckingham, "why MaryAnne Hennessey, or Lizabeth Christian? Why any particular individual? How do you identify a vampire? Hennessey and Christian had parents, a history. Christian had garlic in her pantry and a crucifix in her jewelry box. Assuming that their murderer believed he was a hero by cleansing the world of 'blood-sucking monsters', why these two young women?"

Charles sat back, steeping his fingers. "I really don't know. Both young women had night jobs. That might make someone suspicious. Both like the same sort of music. Perhaps they were seen with some individuals that your 'perp', is that the word--had good reason to believe were vampires."

Nick leaned forward, moved his water glass around the table. "Plural, Charles? Individuals. Vampires. Just how many vampires are we talking about here?"

Charles assumed a casual mien. "Well, since we're talking hypothetically, it hardly matters. But, if you assume there is one vampire, it is sensible to assume there are others."

"Yes, hypothetically." Nick glanced at the clock on the wall behind the counter. "Well, I'm supposed to be at work now." He stood. "I'll see you later, Nat. Charles, it's been pleasant." He slipped into his coat, smoothing the fit, and walked out of the snack bar.

The nearly full moon was at its height when Nick picked Natalie up from the precinct to drive her to Janette's apartment. The city was alive with most of Toronto's night life. As Nick navigated the city streets, he stole a glance at Natalie. "Janette is going to meet us at her apartment then return to the club."

Nat snorted. "Oh joy, the dragon queen is going to tuck me in."

"You don't have to do this, Nat," he stared at the road. "It's a favor, above and beyond the call of duty. I appreciate it, but I wouldn't think any less of you if you decide to back out."

"Yes, you would, and so would I if anything happened to Janette," she told him.

At the luxury residential building, Nick slipped a security card into a scanner which gave them access to Janette's penthouse apartment. Nat held her breath as the doors opened into Janette's foyer. "Wow!" She exhaled softly. "This is some place!"

Nick smiled wryly. "Yeah, Janette always chides me for living like a 'peasant'."

The lady in question came out of a back room. "Bon soir, Nichola." She kissed him on both cheeks. "And the good docteur. Bon soir. I have laid out linens in the guest room as well as a peignoir. I was not sure that Nichola would give you enough time to go home and pack your own things." She looked ever bit the elegant aristocrat she was.

Natalie was cordial. "Thank you, Janette. You are most gracious."

"Mais, bien sur. In the old days, we had servants to watch our sleep, but these are new times. Now we must rely on friends, and friends of friends."

Natalie gave little sympathy. Being compared to the servants of a medieval life style did little to amuse her. "I am so sorry, but times do change, you know. Even if you don't."

Nick was aware of her annoyance, but he found it mildly amusing. Nevertheless, he had no desire to referee the two ladies in their conflict. "I think I'll be off now." He started for the door. "I'll check back tomorrow after sunset. We don't want our hunter seeing my car about."

Natalie lay on the dark satin settee, dozing. She had slept well the night before in Janette's guest room, and now occupied a place in Janette's own suite. She tried to stay aware and fulfill the responsibility for Janette and herself. From Janette's considerable library she had taken a few books. Unfortunately, much of the library was in various foreign languages, and what was in English inclined toward the heavily philosophical. Natalie was a little surprised. Nick's description of Janette had led her to believe that the female vampire was somewhat on the shallow side. The preferred reading for a day like this was more to the light romance and none seemed to be in evidence. The book she had been attempting fell from her grasp and hit the floor. Its heavy thump startled her and she jerked awake. She looked around to find what had awakened her. A small smile touched her lips when she saw the book and she relaxed. "Gudjief as a cure for insomnia. I could make millions."



She sat back, trying again to read the philosophical tome. Suddenly she heard a click. She turned toward the door of the sitting room, and saw the handle twitch. She gasped, then dashed into Janette's bedroom and locked the door behind her. Like Nick, Janette lay death-like in her sleep, her hands folded across her chest. Natalie paused, hesitant to awaken the sleeping vampire. A sound from the sitting room galvanized her into action. She reached out to Janette, touched her shoulder.

"Janette! Wake up!" She whispered and gave a firm shake to the other woman's shoulder. "Janette! There's someone in here! Wake up!" She shook a little harder. The vampire's eyes popped open, yellow-red in her rage. Natalie backed away, but stayed close to the vampire, rather than the intruder. She took advantage of Janette's vampiric senses, barely mouthing the words. "We need to hide, Janette. Wake up." She helped the other to rise, led her into the closet. Natalie closed the closet door behind them and silently blessed the vampire for having a closet door that locked from the inside as well as from the outside. It was furnished with a small peep-hole. Natalie did not question why, just took advantage of it. She stood in front of Janette, her hand on the peep-hole. "Maybe we can see him." She saw the bedroom door open. Saw the male figure enter. She stood taller, peeked through the hole, trying to get a glimpse of the man's face. "Shit!" The exclamation passed her lips, but with no voice. She backed up and closed the peep-hole. She and Janette sat down to wait out the hunter. Janette fell asleep almost immediately. Natalie took longer, but the dark coolness, coupled with the enforced stillness won out. Natalie jerked awake, startled out of sleep by Nick's near-frantic voice.

"Nat, Janette! Where are you?" The voice stopped. Natalie knew that Nick was homing in now on her heartbeat.

"Here, Nick. We're in the closet." Nat nudged a drowsy Janette. Suddenly the door opened and flooded with light from the bedroom. Natalie saw Nick in silhouette. He reached out his hand, pulling her into his arms with the superhuman strength she both feared and admired. Janette struggled to her feet, and took the hand that Nick belatedly held out to her, half-snarled at the sight of Natalie, who was still held snugly against Nick's left side. She emerged from the closet and growled fiercely at the sight of her boudoir. The bed covers had been ripped off, mattress up-turned, drawers pulled out and dumped on the floor.

"I shall kill the beast. I shall tear his throat out and lap his blood from his still-beating heart," she seethed.

Nick released Natalie and went to Janette. "Now you can justify that new interior design." He gently glided his hand across her back. "It's a challenge from him to you, my dear. He wants you angry."

"He has succeeded. I am angry," Janette spat.

Natalie picked her way across the room and opened the bedroom door. "Can we talk about this in the kitchen? I'm hungry. I always get hungry when I'm upset." She disappeared toward the kitchen. She retrieved a danish from the refrigerator.

Janette followed, still visibly seething over the mess in the bedroom. "Hand me that wine bottle, please." She reached up to get a glass from the

rack above the sink, but turned to Nick mid-reach. "Would you care to join me, Nichola? The vintage is much finer than that you offered me, I guarantee."

Nick shook his head. "No, thank you, I've already eaten."

The three sat at the table, by mutual, if unspoken, agreement. Natalie pushed the sweet pastry around, then spoke. "I saw the intruder, you know. It was Charles Buckingham."

Nick glanced up from his contemplation of Janette's hemoglobin/wine cocktail. "I can't say that I'm very surprised. I have been unable to like the little twit much."

"So," interrupted Janette, "may I ask who is the 'little twit'?"

"He's Nat's gentleman caller. She has been dating him for about three months," Nick replied.

Nat sighed. "In my defense, I'd like to point out that I started dating him in the first place in the hope that he might be able to help me find a solution to your 'problem'."

"Your 'problem'?" Janette smirked. "May I say that I am quite happy with my 'problem'." She daintily sipped from the wine glass. "And I have no intention of allowing some envious little mortal kill me for it."

"Envious?" Nick's brows rose. "That would explain a lot." He turned to Natalie. "What do you think? Could that be his motivation?"

"I don't know, Nick." She picked up a bit of the flaky pastry and put it in her mouth. "It makes a certain amount of sense, but it's crazy, too. Who the hell even believes in vampires these days?"

Janette smiled. "Yes, that has always been our protection. He obviously does."

Nick rose from the chair. "Look, it's time for us to be at work. I think Janette can take care of herself now that it's dark, Nat. Will Buckingham come to take you for dinner break?"

"I suppose so. He's been doing that for the last few nights."

Nick smiled ferally. "I think I'll invite myself along again this evening. We'll see what he has to say for himself."

It was simple for Nick to linger at the precinct. Stonetree was ready to give him a medal for getting caught up on his paperwork. At 11:00 he glanced up to see Charles pass by on his way to the elevator. He rose from his desk, slipped into the stairwell, and used his abilities to land on the basement floor and reach Natalie's door well before Charles. He walked in and motioned to Natalie. "Your swain approaches."

"I'm ready, Nick, I really don't understand what we're doing."

Nick squeezed her shoulder. "I'm not sure myself. I think that if we get him to talk, the answer may present itself."

Charles walked in. "Hello, my dear. How has your evening been?"

Natalie smiled. "Busy. We've had two arrivals who should prove interesting in autopsy. By the way, Charles, Nick has invited us to his place for dinner this evening. Isn't that lovely?"

Charles' face darkened with displeasure, but he smiled gamely. "Delightful, I'm sure."

Nick ushered them out the door. "Don't hold your breath. I've been on this restricted diet for so long, I've forgotten what real food should taste like. But," he put his hand on Charles' shoulder, "I wanted a chance to talk to you about your theories in private."

The car ride to Nick's apartment was civilized and conversational. Natalie sat next to him in the front seat, Charles sat by himself in the back. At the apartment, Nick punched in the security code, taking care that Charles did not see it.

"Come in." He helped Natalie off with her coat and took Charles', and hung them in the front closet.

Charles began to wander and examine various of Nick's accumulated treasures. "Early eclectic, eh, old man?" He paused to take in one of several of the oil interpretations of the sun on Nick's wall.

In the kitchen, Nick prepared a tray of aperitif and crackers. "Yes, I may not know art, but I know what I like." He saw that Charles had picked up one of the pre-Columbian artifacts, and was careless in handling it. "Careful, 'old man', that piece is over fifteen hundred years old." He brought the tray out to the coffee table and set it down. Sitting down next to Nat on the sofa, he poured two glasses of Kir. "Charles?" He handed Nat hers. The doctor sat in the wingback chair on the other side of Natalie.

"Thank you." He took the glass along with two of the crackers. "You're not joining us?"

"No." Nick shook his head. "I've got so many food allergies, it's just easier not to." He sat back in the sofa, and watched his guests eat. "I've been thinking about your comments the other night on the Hennessey murder. If there is such a thing as vampires, does the vampire hunter become a hero? I confess I thought van Helsing was a loon in Dracula and his assistants were idiots."

"That was a novel, Knight! Think about it! Imagine a whole race, or maybe even species whose goal is to destroy humans!" He stopped, put his glass down and looked at Natalie. "Look you're going to think I'm a loon, but I happen to know that vampires do exist."

Nick and Natalie exchanged knowing looks. Nick spoke. "I'm sorry, Charles, but I'm a cop. I'd need some damn good evidence before I'd believe a thing like that."

Leaning forward in the chair, Charles looked intently from Natalie to Nick. "I'm going to tell you a tale I've never told anyone. I swear on my family honor, it is true." He took a ragged breath. "When I was in medical college, twenty years ago, I had a roommate." He sneered. "George was a total boor, a peasant at best, but, he was my roommate, so we often socialized. We went on holiday to Paris, and did what all the young men do in Paris--we fell in love.

"Unfortunately, both with the same woman. Monique Dauplais." He looked away and in his moment of nostalgic reverie, he missed the glance exchanged between Nick and Nat. Her silent "Your Monique?" and Nick's nodded assent went unnoticed. Charles continued. "God knows why, but she chose him. We returned to Edinburgh. I must admit to not being terr-



ibly heartbroken when he died three weeks later. Some sort of blood dyscrasia. Then," he paused dramatically, "three days after the funeral, he came to visit me. He laughed at me, chided me. No breeding, no class, and he was going to live forever, he said. He told me that Monique was a vampire, that she had changed him. He was going to kill me, feed off of me." Charles leaned back in his chair, shaken still by the events of two decades past.

"Suddenly, George backed off. He said he'd changed his mind. He said he would let me live and grow old. He felt it would be better revenge for my petty snobbery' as he called it. God, I wanted to kill him right then, but I didn't know how. We are totally unprepared for that kind of evil. I finished my medical training, and then I went back to the university and learned everything there was to learn about vampires. It's been twenty years." Charles smiled. "But now I can kill him. I stumbled onto Monique here in Toronto. I killed her and her current paramour. I killed their fledglings, too. Next, I will find George." He stood up and walked to the fireplace where he turned to face the two seated on the sofa. "It's my mission. I know it sounds mad, but it's my mission to find these monsters and destroy them. They're stronger than we are. Practically impervious to traditional weapons. They can convert whomever they will. Nick, all humanity is at risk! They must be stopped, destroyed, before they destroy us!"

Natalie went to Charles, and put her hand on his shoulder. "Charles, if the legends are true, we've co-existed with these creatures for thousands of years, if not our whole history. They sound like dangerous predators, a risk to individuals, yes. But to humanity? Why?"

Charles clasped her hands. "Natalie, there are innocent lives at risk. Both to death and to vile corruption. I've been working on this. I've devised several weapons." He walked to the closet and withdrew his coat. He pulled a pistol crossbow out of the pocket, the stock about eight inches in length. "The bolts are made of ash, guaranteed vampire killers if I can catch the monster in the heart. I've done a lot myself, but the three of us, especially with your connections in the police force, we could do so much more. You don't understand, they've literally infested Toronto, like parasites. There's a nightclub, a vampire hang-out, for God's sake! Help me destroy them!"

Nick stood up. "Charles, this is all insane. You've just confessed, in front of a law enforcement officer to killing four people. There are no exsanguinated corpses lying around the open. Did you ever see this Monique kill anyone? The only crime spree we've seen is the one foisted against MaryAnne Hennessey and Lizabeth Christian, both of whom have families who are mourning them. If there are vampires, you've given us no evidence that there's any reason to extinguish them as a species, other than your prejudice and 'petty snobbery'."

"NO! Damn it!" Charles pounded his fist against the mantle. "They are monsters! These walking dead have always been the enemy of mankind! They think they're so clever, unstoppable, unbeatable. Well, I've stopped several, beaten several. And I shall continue to do so. With or

without your bleeding heart liberal help." He moved to the door. "Come, Natalie. Let's go."

Nick walked to the refrigerator and filled a wine glass for himself from the dark green wine bottle kept there. He casually walked to the door where Charles pleaded with Natalie to go with him.

"You know, 'old man'," he took a delicate sip from the glass, ignoring Natalie's moue of disgust. "I think you have made several mistakes in judgement here. You have confessed to cold-blooded murder. You killed MaryAnne Hennessey and Lizabeth Christian, both of whom were not vampires, which means that so far you're running 50% in error, and," he paused, "you sorely misjudged me!" Natalie watched helplessly as Nick's eyes took on a sulphurous glow. He smiled widely, a predator's smile, and she watched as the fangs grew.

"Nick! Stop it!" she shouted.

Nick closed his lips, and the glow died in his eyes. Natalie trained her attention, her will on Nick as Charles stood paralyzed. "Nick, we can handle this as humans. We don't need the vampire." Her tone was low, rational.

Nick shot her a harsh look, then turned her focus back to Charles. "He killed them out of envy, Nat. He wants desperately to be one of us. If only he knew, if I could tell him..."

Charles slowly came out of his shocked stupor. "No! That's a lie! Monster! You and yours would destroy humanity if you could!" He reached in his pocket and pulled out a rosary. "Nat! Stand behind me! I'll protect you!"

"Don't be silly, Charles." She stood by Nick. "I've known Nick for over two years."

"Natalie!" Charles pleaded in his madness. "He's a bloody vampire! He'd as soon kill you as look at you. Sooner, now that you know his secret!"

She touched his face and tried to calm him. "I knew Nick for what he was when we first met. He wants to become mortal again. He hasn't killed to feed in over a hundred years. One reason I wanted to get to know you better was I had the hope that you might know some way he could become mortal. The vampires are just like the rest of us, Charles. Good, bad, strong, weak."

Grabbing her by both shoulders, Charles shook Natalie like a puppy. "You lying bitch!" He struck her across the face, then threw her back against Nick. "You would use me to help your vampire lover?" He drew back his hand to strike again, and found it caught in the vise-grip of Nick's fist.

"Touch her again, Buckingham, and you will die." The vampire held on to his control by the thin edge.

"Kill him, mon Nichola! Kill him now!" The voice came from the loft where Janette stood defiantly.

Charles swung his hand, revealing the rosary still held. With that in his fist, he punched Nick in the mouth. Nick reeled back, licking his lip where it bled. Natalie scrambled away, toward the steps of the loft where Janette stood.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Charles had time to raise the small cross bow. "Wood, vampire! Good English ash!" Janette gave a small shriek, which distracted the Brit. He fired the crossbow and the quarrel appeared to strike Janette in the chest.

"Janette!" Nick screamed his rage. He turned on Charles. "Barbarian! Nine hundred years, lost in one stupid, malicious act! Prepare, Buckingham! I don't have George's forbearance." He propelled himself at the man, finesse gone in the heat of the moment. Charles pulled back his fist, rosary wrapped around his hand like a street punk with a bicycle chain. Nick dodged the blow, landed one of his own in Charles' midsection, so powerful as to lift him up off his feet. Charles thudded to the floor, rolled over to stand again. He climbed to full height, a red-capped bottle in his hand.

"How do you feel about Italian--Monster?!" Charles opened the jar and flung the contents in Nick's face, smiling as the garlic powder instantly raised welts on Nick's face. His cry of rage and pain filled the apartment. Nick tried to rub the damaging garlic out of his eyes. As Nick struggled, Charles grabbed the crossbow from the floor where he had dropped it. Natalie looked up from Janette's still body to see Charles fitting a second quarrel into the bow.

"Nick! Look out! He's got the crossbow again!"

Nick stopped moved and trained his vampiric hearing on the other man. He heard the soft snick as the trigger was pulled. He launched his body up, landing behind the sofa. He felt the solid thunk as the quarrel struck the furniture. He gave his eyes one last swipe, then peered over the edge of the sofa. He could see again, but painfully. Charles was at the front door, attempting to load a third bolt into the crossbow.

Nick focussed his attention. "You cannot fire. Your fingers will not obey you." Their hearts synchronized. Charles' vision became vague, the crossbow lowered. Suddenly a black form swooped between Nick and Charles. Janette, her shoulder oozing dark blood, attacked. She grabbed his head with one hand, neck with the other. In a heartbeat, her fangs sank deep within his neck. From where she knelt on the landing, Natalie heard the obscene slurping, followed by the sharp snap as the neck was broken.

Nick sank slowly to the floor, then crawled to Natalie. Holding his hand out to her, he gathered her in his arms and assisted her in rising. He felt her shudder as Janette rose from the corpse of the would-be vampire slayer. The female vampire's mouth was smeared and bloody. Almost daintily, she wiped her mouth with the corner of her skirt. The monster in her slept again, her eyes were clear and blue, her teeth even.

Nick held Natalie close as he spoke to his former lover. "That was unwise, Janette. His death will be difficult to cover."

The female vampire rolled her trim shoulders nonchalantly. "He could not be allowed to live. I saw you weakening. You were going to attempt to 'reason' with him." She shrugged again. "I took care of it for you. Now you and your little friend can clean up the mess."



Distancing herself from Nick, Natalie forced herself to take in the scene-- the torn throat and broken neck of her 'gentleman caller', the blood still at the corners of the otherwise sophisticated-appearing woman. The ashen shaft had left a nasty hole in the dress and flesh of the other woman. Natalie turned and looked at Nick. His face was still blotched and blistered from the violence of the garlic powder. Natalie touched his face, caressing the wounds gently.

"The first 'cleaning up' that needs to be tended to is the pair of you. Nick, go flush as much of that garlic off as you can." She walked down the stairs to where Janette stood. "Sit down, Janette. Let me see your shoulder." Both were aware that Janette's own vampire body would reject the bits of splinter and fabric driven into her shoulder by the ashen bolt. But, Natalie knew from her experience with Nick, that the wound would heal that much faster if the fragments were removed. She tugged the fabric of Janette's dress carefully to expose the wound. She began picking the bits from it. Though she'd seen it before with Nick's body, Nat still watched in amazement as the wound closed ever so slightly before her eyes. Nick returned to the room, blotting his face with a towel. Like Janette's wound, the blisters on his face were healing visibly now that the caustic garlic had been washed off.

Janette looked both sheepish and defiant. The adrenalin had begun to wear off. "He had to die, Nichola. You know that."

Nick sat on the sofa across from her. He leaned back, exhausted. "I don't know, ma petite, I don't know. He believed himself a hero, defending humanity against the 'minions of the night'. I just don't know..."

Natalie looked up from her work on Janette's shoulder. "I do. She's right, Nick." Natalie eased Janette's sleeve over the wound. She went to the couch to sit next to Nick. "God knows, I hate to say it. Charles was..." She paused. "Not exactly sane on the subject. It didn't upset him that he had murdered two innocent young women. He wasn't morally affected when you told him. He had a mission to 'save humanity,' and he enjoyed proving his superiority. I...I have to admit, in spite of everything, I liked him in some ways." She shook her head ruefully. "I have truly lousy taste in men. A serial killer and rapist, an egomaniacal fanatic, and a dead man."

Nick was taken aback. Did she realize what she had just admitted to, the very thing that he had feared, yet most desired? Did she mean to defend Janette's actions? "Natalie, are you willing to falsify records? Are you saying Janette was right?"

Natalie sighed heavily. "If it had been you, I would have been horrified. I certainly would have been pissed off at you for setting your coming over back."

She surveyed Charles' lifeless body and shuddered again. "We've got to deal with this somehow. We are deluding ourselves if we believe it will be simple to make Charles' death appear as suicide or an accident. God, I'm becoming as void of conscience as the rest of you." She was overwhelmed.

"Not void of conscience." He took her hands. "Natalie, there is no 'right' answer." Nick looked down. "I was a crusader myself. I know that can happen when you're on a mission you feel is righteous."

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*With the eastern sky paling, the black-robed friar and the dark-dressed man worked together. The priests, slaughtered by the vampire, were prepared for their graves, limbs and robes neatly straightened. LaCroix and Janette watched impatiently. LaCroix clutched Nick's shoulder. "Come, my Nicholas. You have fed well. You have avenged your children and stopped these petty humans from endangering others of our kind. Kill the last one and let us go."*

*Nick shook off the older vampire's hand. "I do not choose to kill him." He turned toward the young monk who had stopped in his tasks to listen as the two vampires discussed his fate.*

*"You and your brethren killed my children because you thought they were a threat. But I've seen you kill men, women, and children for the sin of believing differently than you." He stepped away once again surveyed the scene. Now the dead monks lay in a row in the refectory. "And I have done the same, but I can change." With a swirl of his cloak, he stroke out of the building, and did not wait for the other two vampires.*

*LaCroix frowned angrily and followed him. He left Janette to fend for herself.*

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Nick returned to the present. He still held Natalie's hand. "Vengeance, justice, saving the world for democracy. Anybody can find a good reason for anything." He looked to Janette. "We could not and should not try to avenge CJ and Monique." He added, "and Charles could not and should not try to destroy us all. The only thing we can do now is to 'clean up the mess' as Janette said." Nick stood, pulling Natalie to her feet. "Go back to the precinct. Charles is about to suffer a fiery, fatal, car accident."

Janette glided to Nick. She put her hand on his shoulder affectionately. "And I will assist you, mon frere," she said wearily.

# *Shaken, Not Stirred*

*by Robert McAlister*

As I returned to my office for a welcome break, I looked across the expanse of the club and I saw a tall stranger enter through the front doors. Male, I surmised, and he was dressed elegantly in a dark full cloak, the style worn in Arthurian days, the type now favored by Renaissance players. There was something I recognized about the man, though it was certainly something I could not place or recall. I settled into my office and watched him through the one-way glass in the door. He moved through the dancing crowd with grace, all the while not removing the hood of the cape. Dismissing the odd feeling the figure conjured inside me, I went to my desk to tend to the paperwork I had been accumulating.

There was a light rap at the door and Jim, my bartender, came in. "Janette, the gentleman at the corner table requests your presence. He will not order unless you join him," he explained.

"Jim, I have no time for such things," I said curtly. I indicated the mountain of work atop my blotter. He nodded, left.

I'd been at work only a few minutes when Jim reappeared at the door. "Janette, the gentleman said that he 'would make the biggest disturbance you have ever seen in all your years'," Jim quoted the stranger.

"Fine, tell him I'll be out shortly." I was quite agitated. That's all I need, I thought--more attention than is necessary!

I finished a portion of the work and went out. I could see only the outline of the annoyance who had pestered me to have a drink. I sat opposite the figure, tapped my fingers on the table. "Well?"

"It's been a long time, Janette. I've missed you greatly," the dark man said.

"Really!" I snapped. "Tell me who you are," my voice was demanding. "I have no time for games, sir!"

"Oh, but I do," his voice was honey-like and just edged by amusement at my discomfort. "You are the one I have searched out for centuries...ever since our first meeting so many decades ago."

"Nick! This joke has gone on long enough!" I pouted. "I'm tired of playing this game. I have work to do." I began to stand, impatient and irritated.

"Who is this Nick you speak of?" he asked. I sat back down. "Is he your new interest? Does he really know you as I do?" the man's deep voice crackled with smug laughter.

Intrigued, I waved for Jim to bring me my usual private vintage. "Who are you?" I insisted again.

His reply was even, evocative. "You will forget this, but I will remember for all eternity."

Suddenly, my mind was thrust back to a time long past, a time soon after I had been brought over.

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I wandered the night hunting for my meal when out of the shadows he stepped, dressed in much the same fashion as now. I remembered that the hunger was growing, gnawing inside me, and I needed what he could give. I could smell the hot pulsing blood in his veins. I could hear the pounding of his heart. Coquettishly, I asked, "What may I do to please you, sir?"

"You may call me by my name, Beauty," he said with a smile.

"And what might that be?" I asked. I could only think of ways to make the arrogant bastard surrender to see.

"Jo'en is my name and you may please me by permitting me to entertain you as my dinner guest." He added cryptically, "and for whatever happens afterwards."

I continued to play the saucy coquette. "Ah, yes, that would be lovely, but," I slithered toward him, toyed with the buttons on his weskit. "Why don't we get to the 'whatever' first?" I knew I had him! He would not resist. Typically male, he would think with the wrong organ!

"May I?" he extended his arm in invitation.

"You may, Jo'en," I knew my voice sounded seductive and encouraging. I took his and we stepped into the street.

He guided me to the most elegant hotel I had ever seen. "I only go to the best," he seemed to anticipate my question. I went willingly through the doors, through the posh lobby, up to his suite.

Once in the exquisitely appointed bedroom, Jo'en became aggressive. He pulled me into his arms and kissed me deeply with a sexual hunger that could only match my own desire for his blood. I reminded myself to play along with his advances for as long as my need could be abated. I never imagined it would be so difficult to feed. He kissed me, his lips trailed across my jaw down to my neck. I desperately wanted to push my fangs deep in his throat. Instead, I felt his lips on my neck. As he kissed, he guided me toward the luxurious bed. I bumped into it and fell onto the coverlet. Jo'en drew beside me, undoing my bodice with the grace of a man with much experience. His large hand caressed my breasts. As I remember it now, he aroused me sexually, as intensely as my bloodlust sharpened. When Jo'en bent forward and began to lick my nipples, I felt the hunger explode inside me. My fangs began to grow and I was certain my moan sounded to him of pleasure. The desire grew. I began to shake and squirm as he moved down to my most sensitive place. He lingered there greedily. I truly enjoyed his attentions. His generous mouth explored every inch of me, then once again his lips were again pressed to mine. I kissed him eagerly. I had to feed my hunger!

I urged him on to his back and deftly began discarding his clothes. The hood of the cloak fell away and I could see his fine features now. Dark thick longish hair, crystal blue eyes, admittedly a most handsome human specimen. If I had been mortal, I could have possibly succumbed to him. My hunger intensified now that I was in control, now that I lay on top of him.

He looked up at me, demanding, "Tell me your name, Beauty."

"Janette," I answered. What did it matter if he knew--in a moment he would be dead. I removed the small remainders of my own clothes. I kissed him as he had done to me. I eased myself atop him and began to move rhythmically. He anxiously pulled me down and held me tightly. I was at his neck, the hunger unabated, my fangs fully extended. I nibbled playfully to gain his confidence. He melted. My teeth sunk into his throat and as I fed, I felt the erotic sensation take me over.

Suddenly, I felt a slight prick at my neck...and I fell into a state of blissful fulfillment. In his strong embrace I felt the deadness evaporate inside me. I felt...almost human.

As I lay there in a drowsy, seemingly drunken state, I vaguely heard him say, "Janette, you will forget this night, but I will remember it for all eternity."

He was gone--just as mysteriously as he had appeared.

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I touched the invisible wounds he had placed on my throat back then. I remembered the dried blood where his canines had entered. Jim placed the drink on a coaster in front of me. Concerned, he touched my shoulder. "Janette, what's wrong."

"Nothing, Jim, it was nothing," I murmured. "I just remembered something that happened so very long ago." I searched the darkness of the stranger's hooded cloak, but I could not see those eyes, crystal blue and hungry as I recalled them to be.

His voice was low. "So you did forget as I told you," Jo'en said.

"Yes, yes, I did." I leaned forward, my anger and confusion evident in my words. "You were clever, you were sly, then and now. But why? Why have you come to seek me? We shared nothing notable as I remember."

"Such harsh words, Beauty," Jo'en shook his head. "And we did share so very much, you and I."

"I did not share blood with you!" I challenged hotly, on my feet now. My drink overturned, spilled onto the floor. "You were to be my meal! It didn't happen the way you want me to believe--it didn't...couldn't!"

"Ah, yes," he rose to full height like a spectre: awesome, dark, frightening, exciting. "Remember to satisfy your vanity, Beauty, but remember too that I am your elder. I am your history, past and present, and history is the truth, even in our darkness."

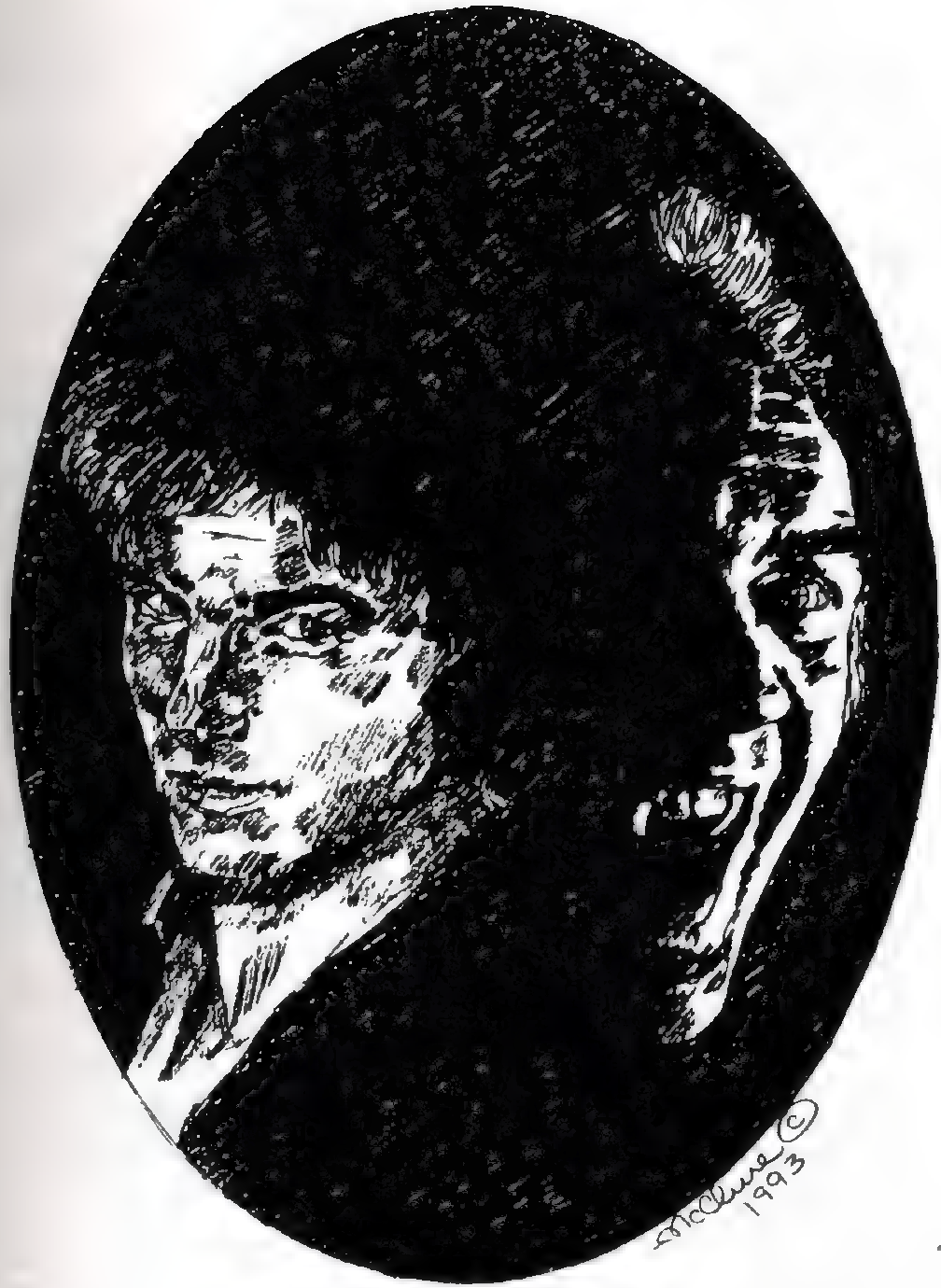
"You may leave now," I snapped. "And don't ever come back--get out!"

"You were always hotheaded, youngling," Jo'en said quietly as he moved away from the small cocktail table. I knew he wore an arrogant smile beneath his hood. "It is one of your more appealing qualities." His head inclined in a slight bow. "I will go as not to disturb your customers." He glided away.

"Bastard!" I yelled at him. "Liar!"

He turned, said prophetically, "Janette, you will forget this, but I will remember it for all eternity."

The door closed.





# Genesis

*by Bridger & McClure*

The phone shrilled, and Peter Caine jerked out of his slouch. Damn. He'd nearly fallen asleep at the wheel. Too many hours, too late at night. Working the night shift was one thing, but not when he was also working the day shift on the same case.

He shook himself and eased the black Corvette back into its proper lane as he grabbed for the receiver of the persistent phone. At least, at this hour, traffic was light, and he hadn't had an unfortunate meeting with another driver. The captain was notoriously irritable about police detectives falling asleep while driving on city streets.

"Caine," he barked into the receiver, stifling a yawn with considerable effort.

"You want to get to the alley behind Wong's Greengrocer on Magnolia. You want to get there right now," a disembodied voice growled over the static on the line.

The wind picked up, and intermittent, fat raindrops plunked against the windshield. The cellular phone didn't work worth shit when the weather got bad. Peter had been intending to replace it with a better model, but somehow hadn't gotten around to it with this latest Chinatown case keeping him on the streets night and day.

"Who the hell is this?" he demanded, staring down at the receiver as if it could reveal a face to match the unrecognized voice.

"Doesn't matter. You interested in stopping the vampire killings or not?"

"Yeah, I'm interested."

"Then get to Wong's. Now."

A click signalled the broken connection and Peter slammed the receiver back into the case. "Jesus!" he muttered. This had wild-geese-chase written all over it. Or set up. Or, he reflected with a certain degree of reluctance, it could be a righteous tip, and he could sit here and do nothing about it and blow the whole damn thing.

He hit the brakes and spun the Corvette into a one-eighty turn--a tiny thrill he had never outgrown--then headed for Magnolia, opting against using the siren at the same time he decided not to call for back up until he'd had at least a look into the alley. Blaisdell was already making noises about taking him off the case because he was working himself into the ground. All it would take would be for Peter to haul out half the 101 on a prank call, and Paul would have him sitting behind a desk for the next three months. For his own good, of course.

He shuddered at the very thought and took the turn onto Magnolia a hair too fast, cutting the headlights even as he wrestled the car out of a sideways skid. Tires squealed on wet asphalt, and the Corvette nearly skewed out of control before he angled it in to the curb at the mouth of the alley.

Peter was out of the car, gun in hand before the vehicle stopped rocking. He caught a glimpse of movement deep in the alley, and he faded into the shadows against the wall of the brownstone.

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The 101 was imposing and impressive, Nick Knight thought as he climbed the stairs that would take him into the old building. He had not been thrilled about having to accept this assignment, but he also knew there was no one more qualified to unearth what was going on. He hated this kind of case; it drew too much attention to things that were best left to the over-active imaginations of movie-goers and couch potatoes. Vampires. An ancient "myth" used to frighten children and adults alike. Only Nick knew they weren't quite myth, at all.

Knight strode through the winding corridors, then took the stairs that led to the squad room, his instinct guiding him to the place despite having no knowledge of the building's layout. All around him he could feel the collective heartbeats of the many people inhabiting the building; and, he could smell the intoxicating flow of warm blood in untapped veins. His stomach rumbled at the thought, reminding him that he hadn't fed for too many hours.

Ignoring the nagging hunger, Nick reached the squad room and pushed the door open. A glance gave him the location of Paul Blaisdell's office, and he headed in that direction. He was oblivious to the attention his passing provoked and the stares of several female officers on their way out. Nick paused long enough to knock lightly on the door, then entered at the barked "Come". Blaisdell glanced up from the paperwork littering his desk top, then leaned back to measure his visitor.

"You're Nick Knight," Paul stated, recognizing the handsome Toronto officer from the personnel file he'd been faxed earlier in the evening. He was mildly surprised that Knight had chosen to come directly to him; he'd been expecting the detective to meet with Frank, since it was Strenlich Knight's superior officer was friendly with. "Captain Stonetree speaks very highly of you, Detective Knight. I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances."

Shaking Blaisdell's hand, then dropping into a seat at the off-handed gesture of invitation, Nick asked, "How man killings have there been?"

Blaisdell supplied the information with a heavy sigh. "Six in the past month." He'd seen several of the bodies, himself, and the killer was brutal, leaving very little behind to identify the victims. It had been years since Paul had encountered anything remotely like these bodies, and the tug of memory wasn't welcome. He pushed aside the thought before it could take root. "Peter Caine's in charge of the investigation."

"When can I talk to him?" Nick asked, anxious to get out of the building and onto the streets. If his suspicions proved correct, there'd be a lot more bodies before they apprehended the one(s) responsible. There was the added complication, too, of being unsure exactly whose problem the killer(s) might actually be: vampires, or humans.

"I'll see if he's checked in," Paul replied, easing himself out of his chair as he ran his hand over his hair. "He's been knocking himself out trying to find this guy. I don't know when I've seen him this determined to close a case."

"I can imagine," Nick murmured once the door swung shut on Blaisdell's retreating form. He couldn't repress a shudder as his mind filled with the faces of people screaming in terror of a death they could barely believe, even as it consumed them. How much was imagination, and how much vision, Nick couldn't be sure. The one, irrefutable certainty lay in their eyes, and the unnatural horror that filled their faces. Nick knew it was far from over, the killing spree would continue. Another face, cruel and mocking, drifted behind the dying ones, and Knight deliberately shut out that image.

Blaisdell's return effectively distracted the threat of maddened memories, and Nick brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

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The street light was nearly burned out. Occasionally, it sizzled and flickered, sputtering into near-darkness before finding a weak glow and casting its frail light over the figure standing motionless beneath it.

He was a tall, powerfully built man with blunt-cut, nearly platinum hair, and he was dressed in elaborate evening wear, complete with opera-length cape. The flamboyance of his attire would have been absurd on a man of lesser presence, on him, it seemed entirely appropriate. While not classically handsome, he was stunningly attractive and thoroughly forbidding. He stood absolutely still within the flickering pool of lamp light until the black sports car stopped across the street and the detective had made his way cautiously into the mouth of the blackened alleyway.

He had been watching the detective for the last two weeks, instinctively knowing where his current investigation would take him, studying his patterns and habits in the hours from dusk to dawn as the cop tried to adjust to the unusual schedule imposed on him by the rash of murders.

Peter Caine was just about perfect.

He was young, physically attractive, even beautiful, and much too idealistic for his own good. Too often, he put the needs of others ahead of his own desires and suffered from a charming naivete that was singularly appealing, though quite impractical. He was also a very good cop.

The street light shimmered off perfect teeth as the cloaked man smiled at that observation. There were many parallels. Peter could conceivably be the companion that the other had not been for many years. In some ways, he was an even better choice. He was younger, would be even more easily manipulated. His belief that the world should be a place of justice and equality would only serve to harden and embitter him when he found it to be a lie...all a lie.

It was very nearly decided.

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"There's still no word from Peter, and nobody seems to know where he could be."

The police captain spread his hands in an eloquent gesture of half apology, half frustration as he dropped into the chair behind his desk. What read both irritation and indulgence in the tone of voice, though, and that faintly surprised him. If it had been Stonetree apologizing for the unexplained absence of a detective, there would only have been irritation anywhere to be found in the voice.

"That's okay, Captain," Nick offered quickly. "From what I understand, Detective Caine has been doubling up on his work load because of this case. Maybe he's taking a couple of hours to sleep."

"You don't know Peter," Blaisdell said ruefully.

Nick raised one eyebrow, but the captain didn't explain the reference and Knight sank into the chair across from him.

"Anyway," Nick suggested, "this gives us a little time for you to tell me something about your series of murders. All Captain Stonetree told me was that it was a similar M.O. to some killings we had last year in Toronto, and that you had requested a consultant."

"You got your guy, didn't you?" Blaisdell asked with a lift to his tone that said he hoped the answer was 'no'.

The Canadian detective knew the feeling all too well. No one wanted there to be too many different psychos out there. Better to narrow it down to a few and concentrate on them rather than have them circling the globe in packs. He sighed in barely concealed empathy as he ran a hand through blond hair. "We got him," he said, almost apologetically. "Actually, it was three of them. Some stoned kids who thought they had a cult thing going. You know, blood sacrifices. Real messy."

"That's what ours are," Blaisdell agreed with a weary shrug of his shoulders. "Real messy."

"What's the run down?" Nick had a feeling he didn't want to know, or, worse yet, that he already knew. With a fatalistic acceptance, he waited for the captain to lay out the facts for him.

"They're all in Chinatown," Blaisdell said, settling back into an inert seat in the squeaking chair. "Sex doesn't seem to be a factor. He's--they--" he amended with a deferential nod "--have killed four women and three men so far. The only thing they seem to have in common is age. They're all young, attractive, in their twenties. No common ground as to occupation, or social status. Everything from hookers to stock brokers, Asian to Caucasian, one black woman." He sighed again, feeling like he'd run through this litany of facts for years instead of months. "They all have their throats torn out. Literally. The one other common denominator that hasn't been leaked to the press is that there's not enough blood at the scene."

Nick straightened in his chair.

The M.E. says that there's more blood missing from the bodies than can be accounted for by the wounds, though they're pretty awful in themselves. But the bodies are nearly drained of blood, one and all. Somehow, for some reason, it's been carted away by the murderer, or mur-

murderers." He smiled, a grim shift of expression that held no humor. "Thus, our in-house nickname, 'The Vampire Killers'. And, the reason you're on loan to us for this. You, Mr. Knight, are supposed to be the expert."

"Rather dubious distinction, isn't it?" Nick remarked dryly, his thoughts racing once again. "Since Caine isn't around yet, I'd like to make a trip to the morgue and have a look at the bodies."

Blaisdell nodded and rose again, reaching for his jacket as he did, then hauling it on.

"I'll go with you," he said, and followed Nick from the office.

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There were at least three of them. They were stooped over a fourth figure, who was sprawled in the alley, unmoving and silent. Peter melted against the wall of the brownstone and inched his way closer. Now that it was too late, he sincerely regretted not having called for backup. Maybe, against all odds, his mysterious contact would call the station with the same message he'd delivered to Peter. He shrugged off the half-formed hope as ridiculous. Long ago, Peter Caine had stopped believing in good samaritans. Hadn't he? He clutched the Baretta tighter in his left hand, the smooth, cool feel of the pearl butt comforting and familiar to his hand.

He was within twenty feet of them, separated only by darkness, when one man dropped to his knees and bent over the still form stretched between them. With real horror, Peter watched him nuzzle into the figure's neck, and he had an instant's sheer terror as he recalled the condition of the other bodies they had found in the last few weeks. Revulsion overrode caution, and he pushed away from the wall, gun gripped in both hands.

"Freeze! Police!"

He heard the words from his own mouth, saw three pair of eyes swivel around to seek him out of the darkness, then, without warning, he was slammed face first into the wall. Lights splintered behind his eyes, then fragmented into pain-filled shards of shattered vision. He clutched at the rough wall trying to stay on his feet, his head swimming with pain and his stomach roiling with nausea, the gun dropping from numbed fingers to clatter to the ground. He felt the trickle of blood dripping into one eye and he tried to turn, to face the attack he knew was inevitable. His knees buckled, and he was only halfway turned when he started to sag to the ground.

Through a blur of darkness and red-washed haze, he saw the fourth man step toward him, then a new figure edged into his dimmed vision. Peter clung to consciousness by force of will as he watched helplessly as the black-cloaked figure reached for his attacker, caught him by the jacket collar and flung him into the opposite wall with the same terrible force that had been used on Peter. The man shrieked a chilling scream that was cut off in mid-squeal when he hit the wall with the gruesome, wet smack of a yielding body against solid brick. He sagged to the ground, leaving behind a smear of gore against the wall.

Through a thickening fog, Peter heard the cloaked man hiss at the other three, then they turned and disappeared into the inky blackness of the closed end of the alley. He had the vague reflection that they couldn't escape that way. The alley ended in a pile of refuse and brick wall. They'd have to come back. He shivered at having to face them again, then the thought slipped away, elusive and untouchable. The rescuer turned to Peter then and, suddenly gentle, eased him away from the wall that was his only support. At the movement, Peter's precarious balance vanished in a swirl of vertigo and he fell forward, to be caught and held, then eased gently to the ground.

"It's all right," the stranger said in a deeply resonant voice, the words soothing and comforting as he cradled Peter to his chest, offering both the support and shield of his own body. "There's help on the way. You will be all right, I promise."

With an instinctive sense of trust, Peter relaxed his hold on consciousness and let his mind fade away from the pain, sheltered in the warmth of the stranger's embrace.

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The proposed trip to the morgue never actually occurred. Knight and the police captain had hardly settled into Paul's car when the call came over the radio. Without a word, Blaisdell had swung around and headed for the hospital, leaving Nick to wonder again about the ties between Peter Caine and his commanding officer. Things didn't get a whole more clear for the visiting cop when they were finally granted access to the room where Peter was being treated.

Nick's first thought was that this kid was too young to be in charge of a gruesome series of murders. His second was to wonder if his suspicions about those same murders could somehow be wrong. If what Nick thought was happening here in Blaisdell's Chinatown was, in fact, what was occurring, then Peter Caine should not be squaring off against his police captain in a treatment room of the local hospital. He should be lying broken and drained of his blood in a dark alley.

Instead, the young detective was fighting desperately to avoid being pulled off the case, and Nick was unobtrusively picking up some insight on the relationship between Caine and Blaisdell.

"Paul, you gotta let me run with this," Peter insisted, brushing impatiently at the neat row of stitches above his right eye, fingers skimming lightly over the dark bruising that had already blackened that side of his face. Miraculously, the deep cut and a bruised shoulder were the only injuries he had sustained. "We've got an eye witness now. We haven't had anything the entire time these killings have been going on, and now we've finally got something. You can't stick me behind a desk. I'll quit first."

"You won't quit and you know it," Blaisdell countered, glaring at the younger man from beneath heavy brows. Absently, he pushed the detective back to a seat on the edge of the examining table, trying, as he had been ever since they'd entered the emergency room, to at least keep



him off his feet. "So, don't bother trying to run that by me. You damn near got yourself killed tonight, Peter." He held up a hand to cut off the knee-jerk protest. "You didn't call for back up. You went into a situation without any more to go on than an anonymous call. That sounds to me like your judgement is seriously impaired and for your own sake, I'm..."

"Paul, you can't."

It was a plea, and it stopped Blaisdell in mid-threat as effectively as if it had been shouted at him. Nick watched, fascinated, with the feeling that he was watching father and son rather than cop and superior. The thought didn't have time to solidify before Blaisdell spoke again.

"What did you say about an eye witness?"

Peter's dark eyes brightened at the shift of topic, and he started off the cot again only to be pushed back down. "The guy who saved my ass. He saw the whole thing. He might even be able to identify some of them. What about the guy he killed in the alley? You gotta..." The spate of words broke off and he glanced from Blaisdell to Nick with only a fraction of a second's question in his eyes when he finally registered that the captain had brought someone in with him, someone who was decidedly not his mysterious savior. "What?" Peter demanded.

Blaisdell shrugged. "Peter, there was no eye witness. And the only person killed was the victim."

"That's crazy. I saw him. He killed one of them." His eyes flicked over to Nick as if seeking agreement or support, then he shook his head. "Who are you?"

With a deep, frustrated sigh, Blaisdell gestured vaguely at the blond detective, and said, "This is Nick Knight. He's the Toronto loaner we requested. You remember. You pulled his file and found the connection to a series of killings they had last year. I was trying to brief him while you were being tossed into brick walls."

The jibe was ignored and Peter stuck out a hand which Nick gripped and shook briefly.

"Thanks for coming," Peter said, then turned back to Blaisdell. "Paul, there was a guy there. He came out of nowhere and he saved my life. He even called it in."

"Dispatch said you called it in yourself, Peter," Blaisdell corrected gently. "You were all alone when...well, not alone. The victim was there. We don't have an I.D. yet, but they should get it to us soon."

"But...but I didn't call anything in." Finally, there was awakening confusion washing through Peter's battered face as he lost his thread of certainty and began to doubt his own memory. "I couldn't. I couldn't even stand up."

"I checked. Dispatch said you identified yourself, gave a location and then passed out. There was no one else there, Peter. You've got a concussion, damn it, there's no way you can be expected to remember exactly what happened. Which is one of the reasons I have to--"

"What about the contact?" Peter demanded, obviously trying to short circuit the renewed threat of desk duty he saw looming ominously on the horizon. *Or worse yet, sick leave*, he thought, as the word 'concussion' reg-

stared in his sluggish mind with a sense of dread. "I remember, he said 'vampire killings'. Nobody outside the 101 knows that's what we're calling it."

"Nobody but the M.E. and the Forensics people and an entire squad of detectives and a town full of beat officers." Blaisdell settled a glare back over the younger man. "It's not exactly a State secret, Peter. I wouldn't hang any hopes on that. It could even be a lucky guess.." He shook his head and heaved in a breath of air. "C'mon, I'm taking you home with me. You can get some rest, then we'll see if you're up to briefing Nick tomorrow."

Pure panic met that pronouncement. Peter sat up straight on the cot and nearly sputtered in his protest. "I'm fine, Paul. Honest. I can go home myself. It's the middle of the night. You don't want to wake Annie up and get her all upset."

"Yeah, I'll just bet you don't," Blaisdell agreed, "but the doctor said 'concussion' and I'm not letting you out of my sight. And I'm certainly not turning you loose to go out chasing vampires any more tonight." The power shifted into darker mode. "Besides, I don't trust you."

"I was just doing my job," Peter said with a spread of his hands that spoke of injured innocence. "I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done."

"Well, I'm the one who has to face Annie every time I pick you up at the emergency room. You're off the streets. At least for tonight."

"What if I go to my dad's?"

"You really don't want to come home with me, do you?"

"I just don't want to upset Mom. You don't either, do you?"

"No, but somehow I think we have different motives in this. Okay. Okay, if you go to your father's and stay there until he says you can leave..."

"I will. I promise."

"I'll get a black-and-white to take you over there. I'd better stay and wait for the M.E.'s report."

"I can take him," Nick volunteered. "It'll give us a chance to talk about the case a little. Give me a head start."

"Great!" Peter agreed too quickly as he slipped off the cot and sidled past Blaisdell before he could be stopped. "I'll check in with you tomorrow, and you'll see. I'm fine."

Nick couldn't resist the thought that he'd just participated in some great escape.

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"Shouldn't you call ahead and warn your father that I'm bringing you home a little the worse for wear?" Nick asked with a sidelong glance at his new, temporary partner.

Peter grinned over at him. "He doesn't have a phone." He shook his head, then grimaced at the lance of pain the movement shot through his head. "My dad's...a little different."

"I was beginning to think the captain was your father," Nick noted wryly.

"He...is, sorta." Peter shrugged. "It's a long story. Turn here."

Nick twisted the wheel with one hand and made the indicated turn, wishing he'd been able to bring the Caddy along on this trip. He'd gotten spoiled with the familiar old car, and this rental didn't have the usual 'accommodations' he was accustomed to relying on. "I like long stories," he suggested lightly.

"I mean, it's a really long story," Peter hedged, but with an infectious grin that hinted it was one that might eventually be shared.

Nick didn't push. He was more than a little acquainted with secrets of his own.

"Tell me about this mysterious witness of yours," Knight invited.

"You believe me?"

"Let's say, I'm open minded."

Peter squirmed around in the seat so he could see his companion better. "He was there, Nick. I didn't imagine him or hallucinate him. He was there, and the guy he threw into the wall...he was dead."

Knight cut a sharp glance over at him, and there was something in his eyes that made Peter hesitate, but he shrugged the reaction off. Maybe he was imagining things. "I know I was kinda foggy," Peter admitted, "but you don't mistake that sound. The way he hit the wall." He shivered at the recollection, the splatting noise still unpleasantly vivid in his memory. "He was dead," he repeated. "And there's something else."

Nick nodded encouragement when Peter faltered.

"They ran down the alley when he took out the first guy. I know that area. There was no way out. They had to come back past us to get away."

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Nick stood in the circle of candle light, feeling the warmth of the gentle glow stealing into his inner being. He always enjoyed the dance of the tiny pieces of fire, one of the few remaining lights he could truly appreciate in any comfort. The studio was literally crowded with candles, all of them flickering their minute points of light out to pierce the shadows draping the room in night. Nick couldn't suppress a shiver of unease at being here, in this room, in the nearby presence of the man who lived here. Kwai Chang Caine had been a surprise, to say the least.

Peter was no preparation for meeting his father. The Oriental cast to the elder Caine's face was repeated only very faintly in his son's features and Nick was not ready to walk into the academy of a Shaolin priest when he helped the increasingly shaky young detective inside the candle-lit room. As if he were aware of the events of the night, Caine had been standing in the center of the anteway, ready to relieve Nick of his hold on Peter. The detective had wanted to talk, insisting he was fine, running on nervous energy and stubbornness, determined to get as many facts translated to Nick as possible in one sitting. His father had quietly taken it in stride, served him a tea with odd and vaguely exotic aromas wafting from the cup, and then nearly had to carry him upstairs to bed when whatever was in the tea collided with the all-but-ignored effects of concussion.



Nick had a momentary twinge of nervousness of his own as he actually considered leaving before Caine came back downstairs. The hazel eyes of the priest were piercing orbs of too-keen insight and knowledge. Nick felt exposed and vulnerable, and he was accustomed to neither feeling.

The thought passed as quickly as it had come. He was going to have to work with Peter, at least until this case was solved or shelved. It wouldn't appear too professional to disappear in an act of outright rudeness to the cop's father. Nick was simply going to have to ignore the emotional probes he felt emanating from the priest whenever he was near them, and try to neutralize them.

He felt the presence long before he heard any whisper of sound. Only when he turned to see Caine step onto the hard wood floor at the foot of the stairs did he realize that there had been no sound, no noise, at all, to warn of the approach. He filed the observation for future reference.

"How is he?"

"He is sleeping," the priest said in his gently halting cadence of speech. He smiled, a subtle shift of expression that softened the planes of his face. "It is sometimes difficult for Peter to slow down and allow his body to function at its normal speed. Occasionally, he needs a push in that direction."

Nick matched the smile with one of his own. "Yeah, I bet he does."

"I have room if you would like to rest, also."

There was a natural grace to the courtesy that tweaked at Nick's memory, an ancient courtliness that seemed out of place here, even in this unique room.

"Thanks," Nick said with a shake of his head, "but if Peter's okay, I'd like to go back to the station and get some more information. Besides, the police department has provided me an apartment for the duration of the investigation." He shrugged off the excuse. "Back home, I'm on the graveyard shift. Actually, I'd rather work at night and sleep during the day anyway." He shrugged again, suddenly edgy. "Look, I'd better go."

"This case..." Caine's voice tugged at Nick, keeping him in place despite the lure of an easy escape. "It is very dangerous?"

Nick was held by the layered concern in the voice, the pain lurking in the depths of the hazel eyes that watched him closely, hanging on his answer. "For Peter? Yes, I think so. He's the one on the case. He's an obvious target. At least it was that way in Toronto."

"You were the officer in charge of that case?"

"Yes." Nick considered saying anything else, but logic dictated that if he needed information on his new partner, here was the ideal source. This case, if it is related to the one in Ontario, is a little more complicated than it seems on the surface," he ventured.

"Yes," Caine said without pretense of ignorance. "Even Peter sees that there is more to this matter than that which can be seen."

"If I'm going to work with Peter, it would help if I knew a little about him," Nick said, sensing an opening in Caine's interest.

Caine nodded with an odd little tilt of his head, his expression an invitation.

"Like the fact that he seems to have an excess of parents."

The statement was met with a smile, but there was a tinge of sadness that caught Nick off guard.

"I'm sorry," Knight said hastily, "I didn't mean to--"

"No," Caine interrupted him with a tolerant wave of one hand. "It is a perceptive question. Has Peter not said anything about this to you?"

Nick laughed. "Peter talks a lot, but he doesn't say much."

"One of his most endearing traits," Caine agreed with a wry twist of frustrated affection. "We were ...separated for a long time. Many years. We each thought the other dead." Again, Caine indulged in the expressive shrug. "The Blaisdells took him in as a foster child."

Feeling he was pushing the point, but genuinely curious, Nick asked, "His mother?"

Another wave of sadness crossed the priest's face like a shadowed cloud of pain over the landscape of his features. "She died when he was born. He never knew her."

"From what I was told, he's a good cop. Dedicated and honest."

"Peter is idealistic. He wishes to save the world, even from itself, if necessary."

"That's a tall order. Most people outgrow it." Nick heard the undercurrent of bitterness in his words, but Caine didn't challenge the tone, nor did he miss the whispered, "I did," that completed the thought.

"I do not foresee Peter 'outgrowing' it," Caine countered.

"The world doesn't tolerate innocence for long, Master Caine." The title came instinctively. "It changes people, not always for the better."

"This is true."

"How long do you think he'll sleep?"

"The remainder of the night and most of the day. He needs the rest."

"Tell him I'll see him at the station tomorrow night, if you would?"

Caine bowed, both an answer to the request and a bid goodbye. Nick found himself answering with a like gesture.

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Paul Blaisdell walked into the squad room at nearly six p.m., rumpled and grouchy. He would never get used to trying to sleep in the daytime, no matter how quiet Annie managed to keep the house. Kelly, even in a display of consideration, had come in from classes and foregone playing her music so her father could sleep. The effort to maintain silence in a house normally full of sounds and comings and goings merely heightened the unnaturalness of the changed schedule and Paul felt like he had been awake all day only to have to face a night in the same condition. He was already in a bad mood when he caught sight of Peter hunched over his computer terminal, the white bandage at his temple a stark contrast to the dark hair that curled around it.

He hooked a finger toward his office and continued on his unbroken path, knowing Peter would follow. Sinking into his well-worn chair, he heard the satisfying creak as it accommodated itself to his body, and he waited for his foster son to close the door behind him.

What are you doing here?"

Peter looked around in mock astonishment. "I thought I worked here."

"Don't get smart with me, kid," Blaisdell retorted. "I can change that, you know."

The defiance died instantly, to be replaced by genuine concern.

"What's wrong, Paul? You look rough. You feeling okay?"

Blaisdell sighed. "I'm supposed to ask you that. I'm fine, just can't get used to this sleep all day, work all night routine."

"I know what you mean."

"How's the head?"

"Fine. I slept like a box of rocks. I think my dad drugged me last night."

Paul's blue eyes considered him from beneath expressively arched eyebrows. "Yeah, I've considered doing that myself. Where's your new partner?"

Peter perched one hip on the corner of the captain's desk. "Don't know. Swanson said he was here all night after he left my father's, then he disappeared just before sunrise. Probably went to get some sleep."

"Did you try calling him?"

"Left a message on the answering machine. If I got loaned out to another city, would I get a fancy apartment, a car and an answering machine, too?"

"You'd probably rate a couch in one of the holding cells," Blaisdell growled.

"Very funny. Gotta get back to it." Peter slid off the desk and turned for the door.

"Peter, be careful."

"Always."

"Peter." The word was a sharp wedge of sound.

Peter turned back, one hand on the door knob, the question in his eyes.

"I mean it. Be careful. I don't want to have to pick up your body at the emergency room the next time."

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The phone call from Nick had come around six-thirty, and by that time, Peter had taken all the computer screen time he could stand. He suggested they meet at the Agrippa Club--anything to get out of the station for a while--and he figured Nick could find it easily enough from the directions he gave. Stepping down into the smoky room, he made his way across the crowded floor through a chorus of greetings from people he knew both intimately and casually. A quick look at his watch showed him he was almost a half hour early. He barely spared a glance toward the stage where Tyler was trilling her way through a sultry song, but the look no longer earned him a pang of regret. He had finally let it go; there was no way he was going to quit being a cop, and no way she was going to accept his choice. It had hurt, but now there was simply a numbness where there had once been pain. He was halfway through the dance floor when he caught a glimpse of his usual table and the man already seated there.

Peter stopped dead in his tracks.

A couple, swaying in reaction to both the music and their response to each other, jostled him, apologized, and set Peter moving again. The man looked up at his approach, his face smoothed into a tentative smile.

Peter dropped into a chair across from him. "Where did you go? Why? Why did you go?"

"Please, one question at a time, my young friend." The man held up a hand as if it could stem the torrent of words, and surprisingly, Peter fell silent. He waited while the other man tipped his glass of wine to his lips, sipped deeply with obvious appreciation of the blood-red liquid, then nodded toward a second glass. "I took the liberty of ordering a drink," he said. "I hope you like it."

Hesitating only a moment, Peter raised the glass and tasted the wine, never taking his eyes off the stranger. It was strong and bitter, acid on his tongue. "It's great," he said. "Who are you?"

"Peter, you are so full of questions. Patience is a virtue. Are you not a virtuous man?" The stranger laughed, a light sweep of sound that brushed against Peter's senses like a waft of air.

"I don't understand."

"Drink your wine and I will try to answer your questions."

He nodded again at the glass, a tip of his silver-haired head, a flicker of mesmerizing blue eyes, and Peter found himself obeying. He lifted the wine glass and drained it, not even tasting the acrid drink.

"But not here," the stranger added, his eyes on the now-empty glass. "I must not be seen talking to you. There is great danger."

"How did they get past you, and what happened to the man you killed?" Peter demanded, trying to stir himself into some sort of control over the conversation even as he felt it slip out of his grasp. Maybe the concussion was worse than he admitted. His thoughts swam through a muddy fog of confusion, and he knew only that he couldn't let this man get away from him a second time.

"I will answer your questions," the man repeated, patiently, as if he were speaking to an anxious child. "But we must go somewhere safe. There are other lives at stake, and I mustn't risk them. You wouldn't want to jeopardize anyone else, would you?"

"No," Peter murmured, losing the drift of the conversation as the music swept over him, a wash of dizziness and noise that mingled with the presence of the man seated across from him. He didn't object when the stranger rose and took his arm, guiding him from the club, nor did he remember he was supposed to be meeting Nick.

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It was cold out, something that barely registered within Nick's mind. He was equally immune to the warmth that greeted him in the overcrowded nightclub. Parking had been hard to come by, so he was at least fifteen minutes late by the time he wended his way through the dance floor and headed back to the corner table Peter had set as a meeting place. The table was easy to pick out, isolated with a clear view of the



edge and the front entrance. A cop's table, Nick thought with a smile. Peter this little niche, Peter wouldn't miss a thing. Unfortunately, he was missing altogether. Tardiness must be one of Peter's faults, he reflected, making his way to the table to wait.

He caught the image when he was still fifteen feet away.

It hit him with a physical jolt and nearly made him trip over his own feet. He had to take another, careful look to assure himself that there truly was no one sitting at the table, no malevolent force wedged into the corner waiting to ambush him when he came too near. Cautiously, reluctantly, he forced himself to cross the rest of the distance to the table. He stood beside it, letting the after-image of presence pour over him like a tide of dangerous waste. Whoever had been sitting at this table had to be at least as bad as Nick, himself, was, and just as powerful, maybe even stronger.

He sensed LaCroix, but that was absurd. LaCroix was gone, and this time he would not rise again to spread his poison to others. Nick had destroyed him. He staggered against the edge of the table and had to brace his body with one hand on the glassy surface. The tingle of the ether's passage raced through his fingers and up his arm, and he jerked his hand back as if he had been burned.

"You looking for Pete?"

It took a moment for Nick to get composed enough to answer. "Yes, I was supposed to meet him here." He turned as he spoke to find a lovely, dark-haired woman standing behind him.

"He's gone. Left about twenty minutes ago."

"Did he say..."

"He didn't say anything. He and the other guy..."

"Other guy? What other guy?"

She backed away a single step, her hand going automatically to her throat to finger the gold necklace there nervously. "You a friend of Pete's?"

Nick caught his unspoken demand as it lurched up in his throat, realizing that he'd better at least appear rational or he was going to start screaming. That'd be a big help. "I work with him. I'm a cop."

"Ain't everybody," the girl groused, relaxing instantly. "Pete and some other guy with white hair. They didn't say anything, just left."

"What did the other man look like?"

"Like I said, big, had silver hair but real spiky. Kinda old for the style, you know? He was at least forty. Real classy dresser, though. Nothing's wrong, is it?"

"No, I'm sure everything's all right," Nick hedged. "They must have forgotten to wait for me."

He started past her, and she added, "Tell Pete that Nicole said to call. I mean, now that he and Tyler aren't a thing anymore, he should get out, you know?"

"Yeah, he should get out, all right," Nick agreed as he pushed past her and headed for the rented car. A couple of calls to the precinct and he could track Peter without raising too much undue attention. After all, Nick was new in town. It wasn't too unreasonable that he'd lose his con-

tact once in a while, and Peter Caine in a black convertible Corvette should be rather high profile.

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The room was elegantly furnished, lavishly expensive, and situated in the best hotel in town. Peter wanted to walk over to the balcony window and look out over the neon panorama in spite of the height involved. He felt he could handle the thirty story view in his present, mellow condition without a twinge of his acrophobia kicking in. The effort to pry his body out of the overstuffed chair was just too much trouble to consider.

The wine had gone straight to his head, and though he tried to concentrate on getting some semblance of answers out of his erstwhile protector, he couldn't quite focus his attention on the questions, even as his conscience demanded that he try.

One question, at least, had to be answered.

"You've got to tell me your name," Peter said, feeling his tongue thick and uncooperative in his mouth.

The other man smiled, a slash of line across his face, and nodded. "My name is LaCroix," he said without hesitation.

"Sounds French."

"It is. It means 'The Cross'. Rather ironic, don't you think?" He chuckled lightly to himself, a surprisingly unpleasant sound, though the irony of the name completely escaped Peter. The blue crystal of LaCroix's eyes hardened, then caught the detective's attention with a force stronger than Peter could resist. "I am trusting you with my name, Peter. There are people here who would do me harm. They would kill me, and those I protect. I am trusting you with my life."

Peter tried to straighten in the chair, attempted to break the hypnotic hold the glassy surface of the eyes had on him. All he achieved was a slight shift of his body. "If you don't tell me who's after you, how can I help you?"

Again, the slash of humorless smile touched the pale face. "It is I who can help you." LaCroix crossed the plush carpeting silently and handed his guest a cut crystal glass full of amber liquid. Peter took the glass at the same time he tried to refuse it.

"I don't think I should..."

"Peter, you must try this. I have brought this bottle thousands of miles for just such a special guest. Besides, it will ease your headache." LaCroix's hand brushed against the younger man's fingers when he released the glass, the touch sending a shiver the length of Peter's arm. The shiver mutated to a warm glow, almost sensuous in its path through his body, and Peter blinked up at his host, confused, not sure what the intention of the touch was.

"I don't have a headache," he protested, then winced as he realized that he did, indeed, have a roaring headache. Must be some delayed reaction to the injury in the alleyway.

"Drink," LaCroix urged, tipping the glass up with one long, pale finger.

Peter obeyed, feeling trapped by the shifting hues of azure in the older man's eyes, blue that faded to yellow, then darkened to gold-flecked green, eyes that refused to release him. The wine was sweet and washed down his throat with an oily texture. LaCroix raised a hand to Peter's temple, rubbed a lazy circle of pressure there, then let his graceful, pallid fingers trail languidly down the sharp angle of cheekbone, tracing an imaginary line down the jaw, across the throat.

The pale face blurred, and Peter squinted against the haze that obscured his vision. He felt the hand glide down his shoulder and across his chest and he tried to rise out of the chair, uncomfortable with the intimacy of the touch. The hand that held him seemed stronger than it should be and moment's panic nearly brought him up in spite of the pressure being inexorably exerted against him. The panic faded, then was lost, and he sank back into the cushioned luxury of the chair. He felt the glass tumble from his limp fingers, knew he should prevent the fall, heard the crash of shattering glass as if from a great distance, then sound and sensation faded just out of reach.

LaCroix caught the glass as it began the arc of its fall. In the same motion, he shattered it on the edge of the table beside the chair, the spray of fragments showering over his hand as he released the stem and let it fall to the carpet.

Peter's head had fallen back against the cushioned pillow of the chair as his eyes blinked, then closed, and LaCroix, indulged in a moment to study the still, child-like features. He was beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than the other companion LaCroix had brought over centuries, then lost. He wouldn't lose this one, though. He would take his time with Peter, savor the genesis as it occurred and not risk losing him to the vagaries of conscience. As if possessed of a separate will, one hand moved to Peter's throat, and the fingers trailed down the column of neck, the warm pulse of life fluttering just beneath the skin, just out of reach. LaCroix swallowed against his hunger and the need that pulsed through his body, demanding satiation.

Unable to resist the small indiscretion, he leaned forward to nuzzle into Peter's neck, his tongue gliding across the surface of skin in a stroking caress of longing. He absorbed the taste, the essence of his prey, and the sensation stirred the need, waking pangs of craving deep within him. He was so close. The probe of his fangs sinking into the yielding flesh, the wash of first blood over his teeth and tongue...

With a physical wrench, he jerked away.

Picking up a shard of glass, LaCroix reached for Peter's right hand, lifting and turning it. He lay the jagged edge of crystal against the skin of the inner wrist, then hesitated. Shifting his gaze to the young man's face, he watched the still features, rapt with his own frustrated yearning as he drew the glass fragment cautiously across the wrist. Peter shifted in the chair, wheezing out a tiny noise of protest at the sting that marked the line of the cut as it was etched into the flesh. A shadow of pain momentarily blunted his features. LaCroix didn't move his eyes away from the young

face as he raised the arm, breathed the scent of the fresh, metallic aroma of blood, felt the stir of hungry lust as his body reacted, and touched the cut to his lips.

Peter jerked his arm at the first, fiery lance of pain as the fangs dipped into the wound, his face contorting with the sensation. Then, even through his unconsciousness, the euphoria gripped him and he sighed as he sank deeper into the chair, his face smoothing out into unlined pleasure.

It took all of LaCroix's control to pull away from the wound. He rocked back onto his heels, kneeling before his victim, angry and frustrated, and it was a long time before he felt in command of his own urges enough to rise and leave the room.

He returned seconds later with bandages and salve, and again went to his knees in front of the chair. By the time Peter responded to his presence, LaCroix was nearly finished bandaging and treating the wound.

"What?" Peter mumbled, half question, half demand.

"You cut yourself when the glass fell," LaCroix explained, finishing his ministrations and inspecting the bandage. "There, I think that will do it. It's a nasty cut, but I don't think it will give you any problems. Do you feel better?"

Confusion blanked Peter's expression, then he tried to sit up, found that whatever had caused the dizziness had passed, and he glanced down at the sticky mess of wine and broken glass on the carpet.

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry," he said hastily, but LaCroix shrugged it off.

"That, my young friend, is why there is maid service in hotels like this. Don't let it worry you. I'm just glad you weren't badly hurt."

Peter glanced at the bandage, felt the sting lingering in the cut and repeated, "I'm sorry. I'm not usually that clumsy." He glanced around at the room, vaguely disoriented, feeling like he had completely forgotten his reason for going here. "Look, I need to get some things done. Will you be okay until I can get back here?"

The feeling of concern tugged at Peter, but he wasn't sure why he was worried. He knew he was grateful to LaCroix; the man had saved Peter's life in the alley. But, there was more to it, and he couldn't quite grasp what it was he wanted from this man. Maybe he should stop by the hospital. He was beginning to think the concussion had been worse than he thought, because his mind sure was somewhere else than where it belonged.

"I will be fine, Peter. Are you sure you should be driving, though? You don't look like you feel very good."

"Driving?" Thoughts were simply too elusive to deal with, and Peter wondered where he was supposed to be driving.

"You said you had to get back to work."

"Oh, yeah." Memory kicked in with a jolt. "I gotta meet my partner. I'm sorry about the glass and the wine. Look, call me if you need anything, anything at all. Okay?"



LaCroix's lips curved into a smile, and he offered the detective a nod of acceptance as Peter backed toward the door.

Peter was halfway down the stairs, too nervous and agitated to wait for the elevator, before he realized that he had come here for answers. Answers he hadn't gotten.

Nick pulled the rental car in to the curb outside the majestic facade of the Sutton Place Hotel. His stomach felt unsettled and nervous, a condition that had grown as he neared the huge building. He couldn't find any logical reason for the reaction, however--something that added fuel to his already piqued suspicions.

He didn't get out of his car for several minutes, simply stared upward. His eyes scanned row after row of glittering lights, searching for something he couldn't name. A tiny pulse of fear fluttered deep inside him, startling him as he recognized the emotion. How long had it been since Nick had truly feared anything? He didn't bother acknowledging the silent answer that greeted his idle thought.

Pulling himself out of the futile reverie, Nick finally opened the door and got out of his car. He shivered in the stillness of the night, and as before, a reaction just beyond his conscious control made him look upward. Again, the face drifted before his mind's eye, and he shook his head, denying the image as much as the whisper of dread that accompanied it. It couldn't be LaCroix, his mind insisted--he was gone. Yet... Everything about this had the feel of LaCroix's madness.

The thought came in spite of Nick's attempts at denial, and he finally took the first step toward the hotel. He reached outward, straining with all his senses to find some trace of the vampire.

His head pinged a stab of pain with each footfall on the stairs, thirty flights of stairs, he reminded himself with an oddly clear piece of memory. So many things were fading in and out of his mind that he couldn't seem to hold onto a single thought. LaCroix. The name slipped into his thoughts, he started to process it through his usual mental file, and it wafted away on some elusive wisp of memory. By the time he reached the lobby of the hotel, he no longer knew why he had come here. Just a vague recollection of LaCroix being a gracious host, not even getting mad when Peter had dumped the glass of wine on his carpet. The guy was genuinely nice in an old-fashioned, courtly manner. Not to mention that he'd saved Peter's life at great risk to his own.

There was some danger to LaCroix. He couldn't remember what, just that it was there, lurking beyond some imagined horizon, and Peter had to stand between that danger and his new friend. Mustn't give away the name. He recalled that much, very clearly. He must protect LaCroix's identity.

Cold night air hit him the instant he stepped onto the street, refreshing him even as it made him shiver in his light jacket. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, closed his eyes, and drew in a deep breath of the

crisp air, feeling it sink into his lungs and ease the headache that hadn't quite gone away.

Before Nick could do more than brush at the collected consciousness of the people within the huge building, his attention was captured by the breathless young man who was all but stumbling through the gleaming glass entrance. When the younger man stopped abruptly, Nick reached out a hand automatically. He was genuinely surprised when Peter whirled back, fear stark on his features.

"Peter?"

"Jesus! Don't do that!" Startled, irritated at the interruption, he opened his eyes, and it took him a moment to focus on Nick's face. The tall blond cop reached out and touched Peter's arm, turning him so that he could get a better look at his face.

"What's the matter with you?" Nick asked, a touch of demand edging the question.

Peter shrugged off the hand. "Nothing."

"You were supposed to meet me at Agrippa's, Peter. What happened?"

"Nothing," Peter repeated stubbornly, fighting down an unreasonably strong flare of anger at the tone. "I had to check out a lead. You know, police work. You should try it sometime." He started past the other man, jerked to a halt, and glanced back at Nick. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that."

Knight ignored the apology. "Who were you with, Peter?"

"I told you. I was checking out a lead. It didn't work out."

"I need to know who you were with, Peter. It's important. It could have a lot to do with the case we're supposed to be working on. Together."

There was just enough censure in the tone to redden Peter's face, and Nick couldn't help notice the violent contrast between the blush and the abnormal paleness of his features. How the hell was he supposed to say *'I think you're hanging out with a vampire, kid, and we really need to discuss it'*? From everything he'd heard about Peter Caine, this irritable, erratic behavior was decidedly out of character. And, unfortunately, Nick was aware of a few reasons behind such unaccounted for changes in behavior. None of them were really healthy for Peter.

"I didn't ask you to come here." Peter cut into Nick's thoughts with a snarl that twisted his mouth into a sneer that looked totally out of place on his face.

"As a matter of fact, you did," Nick responded, forcing his voice to remain even.

"Then I've changed my mind."

"So we're stuck with each other until this case is over," Nick told him, using the innocuous observation as a way to take another good look at the other officer.

"Yeah, well, I had something personal to take care of," Peter replied, grasping the vague assertion as it came back to him in slight variation to his previous statement. He could hardly think straight at the moment, and it seemed as if someone else were feeding him his words.

The confusion didn't escape Nick's notice.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Peter ignored the query and pushed past him, heading for the illegally parked Corvette. Nick caught him by the arm, and Peter spun around, his left hand coming up in a flying wedge that would have destroyed Knight's nose if it had been allowed to land. Nick blocked the blow, nearly missing the connection in his amazement at the suddenness of the unprovoked attack, and Peter dropped his hand, shook his head in confusion, then stepped backward toward the car.

"I'm--I didn't--" He shook his head again and turned away. Nick didn't hesitate to grab him again before he could dart around the front of the ebony car, but this time when Peter turned, his hands were spread in baffled surrender. "I didn't mean it," he said, shaking his head, brown eyes wide with near panic. "I wouldn't--"

"It's okay," Nick said quickly. "It's okay, I just want to help. Let me help."

"There's nothing wrong! I'm fine!" Peter snapped, anger flaring to life another time despite the concern on Knight's face. He ignored the fact that his outburst was disproportionate to the force of the enquiry. Raising a hand to his forehead, he wiped at the sweat he felt there. It wasn't warm, but he felt like he was burning up.

"How did this happen?" Nick demanded, drawing Peter's over-bright eyes back to his. He grabbed the injured wrist and held it, his look daring Caine to not answer him.

"It's nothing," Peter retorted quickly, jerking his hand back as a new wave of annoyance flooded over him. The twinge of pain that the motion caused made him grit his teeth. "And, it sure as hell is none of your business, Knight."

Nick backed off with real effort. He had his suspicions, but he also had an equal number of doubts to counter them. Maybe he was overreacting. It was just... Nick shivered again, his gaze drifting upward against his will.

"Who did you come here to see?" Knight posed the soft query a second time, capturing Peter's eyes with his own intense look. He read the jolt of panic in the younger man's brown gaze, then it was gone--shielded in a way that Peter shouldn't have been able to employ.

"I told you it was none of your business," Peter whispered.

The detective's voice was low with a chill that Nick knew, instinctively, was not a natural part of the kid's personality. He also knew he'd only make the distance grow if he continued to pursue his current line of questioning.

Peter ducked his head, choked a breath of air, and shivered once, a spasm that shook his entire body. When he looked back up at Nick, his face was calmer, his eyes clearer. "We need to check in at the station house," he said, his tone completely even and normal-sounding. "We can drop your car off at your apartment and go in mine if you want."

Nick stared at him, searching his face, finding nothing but the reflection of a perfectly normal question of two cops deciding which form

of transportation to use in an on-going investigation. *Okay, he thought, okay, for now, but you're not getting out of my sight for even one minute.* "Let's take my car," he suggested, carefully controlling his own voice. "We can leave yours at the station. I don't think I'd fit in that thing anyway."

Peter grinned, a purely natural expression, the first one Nick had seen tonight that looked like it belonged on his face, and he said, "Okay, but we'll leave it at my place, then we can go see if anything's turned up."

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Peter slid into the rental car and glanced at the roomy interior. "You could set up housekeeping in this boat," he commented lightly.

"Trunk's not big enough," Nick corrected, then glanced at his passenger as he pulled away from the curb. Peter looked better, less pale, less confused. He looked like he should look, a young cop with some color in his face, a definite light in his dark eyes. If he hadn't known better, Nick would have been reassured. All it took was the memory of the aborted strike Peter had aimed at Knight's face outside the hotel. Peter played life with a very strict set of rules of fairness. That much, Nick had gleaned out of his brief contact with the detective and from observing others interacting with him. Peter Caine did not launch unprovoked attacks on near-strangers.

A taste of acid touched Nick's tongue and he grimaced into the darkness beyond the windshield. This had all the indications of someone prepping Peter, getting ready to 'bring him over' Nick no longer doubted his perceptions of the mutating personality and behavior. The recent activity surrounding this area was almost a direct blueprint. As moments of normalcy intruded on them--Peter's trying to hold onto his humanity, even though he had no idea whatsoever that he was in danger of losing it--Nick could have been soothed into a complacency that might spell disaster for the young man. It didn't help that, as the influence grew stronger, more out of Peter's control, the detective would fight Nick at every turn.

The first thing Nick could do for the kid was to get him back within the shielding presence of some of those who did care--like Captain Paul Blaisdell.

"Let's swing by the 101," Nick suggested. "We can see what's been turned in, if there are any changes being reported."

Peter squirmed in the other seat, turning with a jerky twist of his body to look out the passenger side window. "We could just call in," he said with a hasty twitch to his voice, "and see if anything's turned up. We don't have to go there."

Nick spared him a quick glance, seeing the rise of color in Peter's face, the nervous reaction manifesting itself despite the attempt to keep his voice casual. Not a good sign. It wasn't the squad room Peter wanted to avoid, it was the concern he would find waiting for him behind the closed door of the captain's office, the concern and the close scrutiny. Nick entertained a passing speculation about how much terror he could induce in his partner if he suggested dropping by the kung fu studio for a quick visit with the Shaolin priest. The question became moot when Peter's attention was snagged by something off to the side.



"Pull over," he said with an urgency in his voice that caught Nick's attention. "Here, pull over."

Nick swerved into the curb, and Peter was out of the car before he could ask any questions. Sliding out a second behind him, Nick followed, his hand automatically dipping inside his jacket for a quick, reassuring touch of his hand gun.

The greeting the detective received on the sidewalk didn't seem to be anything that promised danger, however, as he approached a nattily dressed man without any hesitation.

"Donny D," Peter said with a trace of forced friendliness, and he clapped the man on the back.

"Pete, my man," the other returned, doing a quick recon of the detective and the blond man who was instantly at his side. "You got a new partner again? You go through backup like they issued them in disposable units, Pete."

"Yeah, well, this is unit number seventeen." Peter dropped into the role, and that was when Nick realized they'd just connected with one of his street contacts. "Nick, this Donny D, my man on the street. Donny doesn't miss anything, do you?"

"I am a veritable font of information," the hustler agreed amicably.

*Damn, Nick thought, even Peter's snitches genuinely like him.*

"I'd love to remain here in this sub-arctic weather, Pete," Donny was continuing, "and discuss the pleasantries of police work, but, as you can see, I am rather resplendent tonight and do have urgent plans, if you get my drift." He spread his hands to indicate that he was, in fact, dressed from toes to top hat in formal, evening wear.

"Yeah, I can see that," Peter said with a lift of one eyebrow, "so where's the party?"

"Hellfyre."

Cobra-quick reflexes had Donny back against the brownstone wall without warning. The informant was pale, his face blanched in utter shock, his fingers clutching Peter's left hand which was fisted into the starched front of his shirt. "That's not polite, Donny," Peter hissed close to the other man's terrified face. "I asked you a question."

"Peter--"

The detective shrugged Nick's hand off his shoulder. "Stay outta this."

"Pete, I only meant that's where I was going," Donny D whispered, his eyes wide with more amazement than fear now. "I didn't mean to invoke your surely justified wrath."

Nick watched the fury fade from Peter's face, then be replaced by confusion. The young cop shook his head once, a silent protest, then he released Donny so quickly that the other man nearly lost his balance. He spread his hands and said, "I--I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"I understand, Pete, you're having a bad day. Just one of those things. You don't look like you're in the peak of good health, either, which is why you are a bit short tempered, perhaps."

"What the hell is this?" Peter demanded, his voice slipping into anger again. "I'm fine. Why does everybody keep telling me I'm not?"

"Perhaps the bandage makes them assume you are somewhat less than up to par," Donny suggested, trying to lighten the mood. He wriggled his shoulders to realign his dress jacket, brushing absently at the now-wrinkled front of his shirt. "That and the fact that you are a little pallid of complexion at the moment."

"You try kissing a brick wall with your face and see how you feel the next day," Peter shot back.

A nerve twitched in the contact's jaw and he glanced helplessly at Nick. This was not the Detective Caine Donny D was used to dealing with, that much was obvious. "C'mon, Pete," he said with an ingratiating smile, still seeking to salvage the impromptu meeting. "It isn't the first time you've taken it in the face, is it?" He shrugged when the verbal spar wasn't parried, and reverted to the previous question. "Anyhow, Hellfyre is a new nightclub, not an expletive. It's the latest phenomenon on the south side. The drinks aren't watered down, lots of atmosphere, very spooky." His face altered to a very effective leer. "Lots of leather, trendy hair, people who look like they haven't seen the sun in years. You ought to try it. It would expand your cultural and social horizons."

Donny hesitated, still looking at Peter with a keen sense of wariness. He evidently decided he wanted to part with his information, and Nick found himself watching Peter more closely than he was observing the hapless informant. There was an edge to the kid's manner that hadn't been there before, something decidedly unnatural for Peter's personality. Before Nick could do more than note the observation, Peter spun away from them without another word and headed for the car.

Knight glanced at Donny, read the genuine confusion, tinged with concern, then he followed the other cop. Donny was still staring after them, his expression unchanged, when Nick drove past him minutes later.

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### *Hellfyre.*

Nick couldn't escape the feeling that the place had been aptly named, if nothing else. As he wended his way through the gloom and smoke, he felt a tingling along the back of his neck. He was being watched. He glanced at Peter and the uneasiness grew when he registered the chill that had come into the young detective's eyes--an expression that was decidedly wrong.

Peter's mood wasn't the only thing that felt wrong. Nick suffered a too familiar ripple of apprehension up the length of his spine. His eyes drifted over the people milling at the bar that ran along one wall of the makeshift club--it was clear that the place had been in the midst of renovations when someone decided it looked good as it was.

He could feel the presence of his own kind, predators among unwitting prey. He glanced back at Peter, compelled to read the younger man's reactions to the atmosphere and the taint of blood lust that hung in the air. Peter caught the look and couldn't still the shudder of reaction at the contact, nor the anger that quickly followed when he understood that Nick hadn't missed the response.

"Why don't we split up?" Peter suggested, suddenly eager to be away from Knight's scrutiny.

For vastly different reasons than his partner, Nick agreed.

"Start over there." Nick indicated with a vague gesture toward the one area of the room he was certain contained more mortals than vampires. Without waiting for an answer, he turned into the crowd and began a mental search of those surrounding him.

*LaCroix.*

The name filled Nick's mind, taunting and frightening at the same time. Knight felt he whisper in his senses, the chill of evil that marked LaCroix's presence. That it was impossible no longer offered Nick a refuge of hope--LaCroix was here. Somehow he was connected to this madness.

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From his hidden vantage point, LaCroix watched the two detectives trace a path through the bustling club. The booming roar of 'music' was muted in this secret room, and he smiled when Peter's eyes turned toward his position. Even with the distance separating them, LaCroix could feel the flutter of fear that quickened the young man's pulse--and sparked an answering vibration deep within the vampire. He had been right about Peter Caine. The dark-haired young man would, indeed, be a worthy companion. LaCroix would enjoy bringing Peter across, and he would take the time to insure the boy's bond to him was strong enough. Peter would not leave, as Nicholas had--if he dared to try, LaCroix would destroy him.

Nicholas.

He watched the blond man weave his way through the crowd, felt the searching scope of Knight's thoughts. Nick's presence had been a surprise, though nothing in LaCroix's manner would ever have revealed it. The shielding of his own thoughts was natural, but he couldn't suppress entirely the whisper of doubt when Knight's piercing gaze moved in his direction. The other vampire's unexpected appearance could easily interfere with LaCroix's plans.

Which meant Nicholas had to be dealt with, quickly.

Rising, the motion effortless and fluidly graceful, LaCroix vanished in a sweep of dark cape.

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Peter made his way through the crowd, stopping to ask questions as he moved, not remotely surprised when he was all but ignored. He could feel eyes watching him, surveying every tiny motion as he made it, and he shuddered. He glanced toward the rear of the club, drawn to something in the darkness, even as he was repelled by the unknown entity he sensed there. Despite his rising panic, Peter walked toward the darkest part of the place.

He had gone only a few steps when he stopped abruptly, jostling a bizarrely dressed couple who glared at him before they continued their

dance, oblivious once again to everything around them. Peter tried to shake off the sudden cold he felt, but it seemed to grow as he unexpectedly met the startled gaze of one of the punks he'd cornered in the alley a few nights earlier--the one who should have died there. He was about to corner the kid when a hand on his arm made him whirl around.

"I told you not to do that, Knight!"

"What's wrong?" Nick asked, ignoring the outburst.

"The body that disappeared from the alley," Peter replied. "He's here."

"Which one?"

Nick didn't bother questioning the other man's judgement. He was well aware that there were as many vampires in the nightclub as there were humans. Knight suspected that the one Peter was referring to was simply one of his kind--which went a long way toward explaining why the 'body' had gotten up and fled the scene of the murder.

"The one slipping out the back," Peter told him, pointing out the leather-clad youth and two others who were disappearing through a side exit. "I'll follow them, and you head out the front," he directed. He was gone before Nick could make even token objection to the order.

The exit led directly into a shadowed alley, and Peter shivered when he stepped out of the cloying heat of the nightclub and into the mist-laden evening air. He reached into his jacket and his fingers closed over the butt of his gun, the solid reassurance alleviating some of the uneasiness plaguing him. Again, he sensed unseen eyes watching him.

"Looks like our cop-friend wants a repeat of the other night."

The voice shot from the darkness like an arrow from a taut bowstring. Peter spun toward it and waited, gun poised and ready. His heart rose into his throat when the shadows began to shift and he realized he was being circled--he had a fleeting image of vultures descending on hapless prey, then he was forced back into a wall as one of the punks leaped toward him. The response was reflexive, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"You really shouldn't have done that, cop!" The leader of the trio admonished him with mock regret. He reached down to his fallen friend, and laughed at the gasp of fear Peter couldn't control when the kid he'd just shot rose and glared at him.

LaCroix watched, fully prepared to step in should it prove necessary. He could sense Nicholas close by, however, and was hesitant to reveal himself too soon. He'd see that this group was properly repaid for their present antics, though. They'd been useful, so far--a condition that had just altered. They'd been ordered to lure Nicholas into the night, not Peter Caine.

Peter was trapped against the wall now, his gun tossed aside and useless. LaCroix felt his rage blossom, and he stepped forward, only to retreat instantly when he heard a well-known voice snarl in fury.



Nick rounded the corner just as one of the punks was lowering his head to the neck of a barely conscious Peter Caine. Anger rose, and he let it wash over him; canines extended, eyes glowing, he advanced on the startled group. Peter slipped to the ground as the men holding him stumbled back.

Careful to keep his back to Caine, Nick took a position in front of the detective and waited to see if the punks would risk an attack on him. He wasn't surprised when fear rose in their eyes and they backed away. They were newly made vampires, and the presence of one as ancient as Nick scared them--with good reason.

Another step toward the terrified trio, accompanied by a growling hiss of rage, and Nick was quickly deserted. He bowed his head and forced his mind to clear of the anger. Slowly, he felt his fangs withdraw, and the night swam into focus around him. He turned to help Peter.

LaCroix watched with growing annoyance as Nicholas hauled the young detective to his feet and led him from the alley. They were nearing the mouth of the blackened corridor when Nick's head snapped up and he stared back into the darkness. LaCroix's smile was involuntary as he easily deflected the mental probe the other vampire cast in his direction.

When they were gone, he called the others back. He had to move faster now, if he expected to get to Peter and possess him. Nicholas was clearly the boy's champion. Plus, there was the added enjoyment of perhaps settling the debt between himself and the other vampire. LaCroix would enjoy defeating Nicholas another time. His thoughts ended there as he felt the return of his 'wolf pack'.

"He was not selected as a target, Blade," LaCroix murmured, his smile holding the promise of death as he approached the young man. "I told you which one. You disobeyed me."

"He's a cop, and he spotted us in the alley. He was here with the other cop."

"His partner is much more than a 'cop'," LaCroix purred. "But, even with your limited intelligence you've figured that out."

Blade bristled at the insult, but held his tongue. It wouldn't do to get this one mad, he knew only too well.

"Peter Caine is mine," LaCroix informed them, enjoying the fear his words created in each of them. He stepped closer and they tried to back away, terror spreading over their faces.

LaCroix stepped from the shadows a few minutes later, and vanished into the fog-like murkiness that swirled around the black hole that marked the mouth of the alley.

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It had been nearly dawn by the time Peter stumbled up the stairs to his apartment and fell into his bed. He slept like a rock, for many more hours than was customary for him. The shadows of early evening were already stretching darkness across his body when he forced his eyes to open. He blinked several times, then squinted into the gloom of his bedroom. The

glowing red numbers on his clock offered tangible proof of just how long he'd been asleep. It was nearing 8:30 p.m.

"Shit!" he mumbled, groaning loudly as he pushed himself into a shaky stand and headed for the shower.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged from his bedroom, shaved, showered, and almost conscious. He'd stopped long enough to haul on clean jeans, then tossed his t-shirt over the back of an armchair as he headed for the kitchen in search of 'breakfast'. His stomach fluttered an objection to the thought of food, but he ignored the twinge. He opened the 'fridge and surveyed the possibilities--nothing looked appetizing, so he went for his usual stand-by, an omelette.

The meal was hardly down before the nausea started, rising rapidly in his throat until he was running for the bathroom. The retching threatened to tear his stomach apart, and he fell back against the wall, gasping for air that seemed to be evading his desperate need for it. The ringing of the phone finally penetrated the veil of misery that cloaked him, and he staggered back into his bedroom collapsing on the bed as he snatched up the receiver.

"Caine!"

"It's Nick. I'm on my way to the morgue, Peter. Seems three bodies were found in the alley outside the Hellfyre. I'll check it out and meet you at the station in about thirty minutes."

"I'll meet you at the--"

"No need," Knight interrupted. "By the time I have a look and get back there, you'll be at your desk, kid. Don't complicate it, Peter."

Before he could raise another protest, Nick broke the connection and Peter was left staring at the dead line. He dropped the receiver back into place and climbed back to his feet. He finished dressing and was on his way down to his car in less than ten minutes.

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"You look worse tonight than you did yesterday," Blaisdell noted, perching on the edge of his foster son's desk. "Why don't you take a night off, Peter." As anticipated, the suggestion earned him a pointed glare.

"I'll take a month off, if you want me to--once this bastard is in custody." Peter resisted his desire to lean forward, fold his arms, and drop his head. The pounding behind his eyes was like a roaring drill, and staring at the computer screen was making the throb steadily worse.

"You're not the only detective in this precinct, Peter," Paul reminded him, with enough ensure that the young man straightened in his chair.

"What's going on, Captain?" he demanded, anger flaring to life as he met Paul's sharp look. "You figure you've got your out-of-town expert now, so I can be dismissed?"

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?" Blaisdell countered softly, amazed at the uncharacteristic resentment.

"Seems to me, Knight's arrival has everyone thinkin' he's the only one who can catch this guy."

Blaisdell made an obvious effort to pull back from the growing fury in Peter's stare. He let his gaze absorb the pallor on his son's skin, and the edginess that was fairly sizzling in the air around them. If he didn't know better, he'd think the kid was on something.

"I'm assigning you desk duty tonight," he decided.

"No way--"

"You stay put," Blaisdell warned, with all the authority of his position and none of the wavering of his parental feelings. "If you leave here without my consent, I'll have you suspended for the duration of this investigation. Am I making myself clear enough Detective?"

Peter stared at him, his expression a combination of hurt confusion and outright disbelief. As those emotions fell away, a masque of cold indifference fell into place, shaking Blaisdell more than any outburst of anger might have. The young man gave him a curt nod and turned back to the screen in front of him. Paul had the distinct impression he'd just been summarily dismissed.

The phone call came less than five minutes later, and Peter welcomed the chance for escape. With a quick, "I'll be right over," he grabbed his jacket and rose.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Paul demanded, framed in his office doorway. He'd been watching his foster son ever since entering the small room, and the call had put an eagerness into the young man that sparked a warning in the police captain.

"It's Knight, he's found a lead," Peter told him. He felt a tiny twinge of guilt as the lie settled between them. "I have to go." When he sensed the opposition about to be voiced, he shrugged and offered Blaisdell a grin. "C'mon, Captain. He's my partner, remember?"

Without another word, Paul watched him go. Dread settled like a solid presence in his stomach, and he slammed the door to his office as he went inside. Blaisdell slumped into his chair with a weary sigh, rubbing at tired eyes. For the first time in many years, Paul felt old.

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Nick arrived at the station a half hour later than he'd told Peter he would be there. He was still mulling over the condition of the bodies when he entered the squad room and looked around, searching automatically for his partner. He was headed toward Frank Strenlich's office when Blaisdell intercepted him.

"Where's Peter?" Paul demanded.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" Nick replied, genuinely confused.

"He got a call. From you," Paul said, his voice dropping with the knowledge that Peter had deliberately lied to him, for the first time. In a relationship that had never known secrets, this sudden lack of trust was a violation of everything that had made their bond such a solid one.

Knight sensed the sadness and the whisper of loss. He remained quiet and waited for the captain to finish his statement.

"He said you had a lead on the killer."

"When did he leave?"

"Half-hour ago," Strenlich informed them as he came to a halt behind Nick. "Whoever called wouldn't give a name, and they weren't on the line long enough for us to trace it."

Blaisdell looked surprised at the information.

"Kid's been actin' a little weirder than usual," Frank offered as explanation. "I figured we might as well know what he's up to."

A shadow of anger crossed the captain's craggy features, and Strenlich added, "I was worried about him, Paul."

"Do you have any idea where he could be?" Paul asked, redirecting his attention to Knight.

"No," Nick admitted, "but I have every intention of finding out." He turned to leave, then recalled a detail. "The Vette's parked outside."

"Check downstairs, he may have borrowed a vehicle," Frank suggested.

Once Knight had left, Paul looked at Strenlich, his eyes despairing. "He doesn't want to be found, Frank. Whatever this case is doing to him, it's changing him into someone I don't know."

Frank wished he had something to offer as dispute to that observation, but his own thoughts were of too similar a nature for him to believe he could convince his friend that he was overreacting.

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The trip to Sutton Place took long enough for Peter to grow uneasy about the proposed meeting with LaCroix, though he couldn't begin to pinpoint a reason for his edginess. He pulled the 'borrowed' car into the curb and hopped out, nervousness giving him even more energy than usual. He almost laughed when he considered the silver BMW he'd 'appropriated' from Impound; this would be the last car anybody who knew him would suspect he'd choose. The fact that he hadn't bothered to get authorization to use the car would make tracing him even more difficult. He wasn't taking any chances on being discovered, not when LaCroix's life could be at stake if he made an error.

Satisfied that he'd made the right decision, even if it did involve lying to Paul, Peter climbed out of the car and headed for the entrance. He went straight through the lobby, past the desk, and directly into a waiting elevator. The long, thirty floor ride seemed endless.

LaCroix paced the suddenly claustrophobic confines of his spacious suite, his mind racing with the scope of his thoughts. He knew he was rushing his plans for Peter Caine. But, the unexpected appearance of Nicholas at the nightclub had sparked the need for greater urgency. LaCroix had every intention of taking Peter with him when he left this city. He should have anticipated Knight's arrival, he berated himself silently. Who better to investigate the type of crime being committed here than one who had intimate acquaintance with the 'cause of death'.



"Damn you, Nicholas!" he hissed in fury, the soft words barely audible within the silence of the rooms. His head snapped up and a smile passed over his features as he felt the approach of his guest.

LaCroix opened the door just as Peter reached it, and the detective strolled into the suite with a casual air he was far from feeling.

"You're very prompt, Peter," LaCroix noted, his voice even and neutral. He gave the door a push, clicked the lock, and followed Peter deeper into the room.

"You said you were worried," Peter remarked, fidgeting in spite of his efforts to appear calm, brushing his hands against the denim at his thighs. "Does this have anything to do with the danger you told me you were in? If it does, I can probably arrange for police protection, get you somewhere safe where you'll..."

"Slow down, Peter," the other man said, raising a hand to halt the rush of words. "You must learn to relax."

Peter shrugged, a nervous twitch of one shoulder, his expression sheepish as he realized the extent of his own edginess.

"Would you like a drink?"

The curt shake of Peter's head was an automatic response, a knee-jerk reaction to the offer. "I'm still on duty," he explained, suddenly afraid he was being rude to this man he owed so much. "Besides, I don't want to end up spilling anything. I think between the concussion and the night shift, my brain is shutting down on me."

LaCroix nodded, his face a study in benign sympathy.

Peter tried to repeat his question of moments earlier, but the words seemed to lodge in his throat when LaCroix's pale eyes locked with his. The eerie sensation of drowning in the grey-blue gaze was overwhelming, but Peter felt compelled to maintain the contact. Instinctively wanting to take a step backward out of the range of that hypnotic vision, he found his body wouldn't obey the command, leaving him staring in mute fascination as LaCroix slowly crossed the space that separated them.

"You're a very special young man, aren't you, Peter Caine?"

The words were odd, to say the least, and a tiny flare of alarm worked its way up through Peter's chest. He smiled, the expression shaky and unconvincing, and when LaCroix glanced away, Peter felt as though some intangible, nearly unbearable, pressure on his body had been released with the shift of the gaze. He gasped in a breath of air and sagged into a chair when his legs quivered in a wave of weakness. It took several deep breaths to steady the erratic beat of his heart, and he wondered irrelevantly why he wasn't getting the hell out of the suite--while he still could. *Such an odd thought*, he reflected vaguely; he genuinely like LaCroix. Didn't he?

"Why did you call?" Peter forced the words out with what he hoped was a commendable evenness.

"You want to know about 'The Vampire Killings', don't you?"

Despite the obvious question in the words, LaCroix managed to make it sound more like statement than inquiry. Peter straightened in his chair and nodded, clinging to the familiar police instincts that the other man's

query sparked to life, trying, with the movement, to nudge out some of the unfamiliar lassitude from his body.

"Are you telling me you know something about this case?"

LaCroix laughed, the sound washing over the young detective like a breath of icy wind. Peter couldn't conceal his reactive shiver, and that amused LaCroix. He watched as Peter struggled back to his feet, pushing heavily out of the chair, then he stepped up to the younger man and met his eyes again.

"Dear boy," he murmured, the softness of his breath a caress against Peter's skin. "The things I know would terrify you." There was a deliberate pause, then intensity of LaCroix's gaze flaring to hypnotic proportions, then he added with an affectionate smile, "If that were my intention, of course."

Despite the softening of expression that accompanied the unusual words, Peter couldn't escape the feeling that he had just been given a warning, and admonition he would be wise not to disregard. He dredged through his mind for some kind of response, but LaCroix made the effort futile when he took a step closer to Peter. The cloying closeness was beginning to feel smothering.

"Are you afraid of me, Peter?" LaCroix whispered, clearly enjoying his hold on the young detective. "Perhaps you should be."

Panic swelled inside Peter and gave him the strength to back away out of LaCroix's paralyzing orbit.

"I really need to get back to work," Peter said, wincing at the rasp in his voice. "If I can do anything to help you, I'll be happy to, otherwise, I have to go."

LaCroix seemed to consider the statement, then once again he closed the distance between them. Predator and prey--the analogy was automatic, as well as accurate. Peter backed away, and LaCroix allowed him to trap himself against the solid resistance of the suite wall. He covered the final step between them to stand directly in front of Peter, feeling the young man's uneven breaths whisper across his features. Blue eyes snared brown again and LaCroix couldn't mistake the leap of fright that put a quiver in the man's mouth and a twitch in his jaw.

Peter's heart was pounding so loudly in his ears that he was sure LaCroix could hear every beat. He tried desperately to turn away from the pale gaze, to make his body obey the need to escape. A flicker of image began to form on the fringes of his inner vision; he recognized his father's gentle smile, then pain exploded in his head. A tiny moan of sound passed his lips as he rejected Caine's image and the protection he had imagined to find there. The pain eased immediately, leaving him more disoriented and confused. He had no time to analyze it; his attention was focussed once more on the man in front of him.

LaCroix felt the shifting emotions, the fears rising and ebbing like a tide beyond control. He raised a hand to Peter's chest, relishing the steady throb of life beneath his fingers. Just the tips lingered in the smoothly contoured hollow, and he felt the tingle run up his arm with each pulse of Peter's life. The flow of blood beckoned to LaCroix, inflaming his senses, heightening the desire consuming him.

"Don't..."

The shaken request put another smile on LaCroix's face; this time the expression was mocking, hued with mild scorn.

"You belong to me, Peter," he informed him. "Ask your father." LaCroix laughed bitterly. "Your life is bound with mine--you owe me your life."

"Is that what this is about?" Peter had to concentrate on shaping the words, but the overwhelming rush of fear offered him unexpected strength. "You want me to..." The words stopped abruptly, and Peter felt a flood of color pour over his features. "That's the price you're asking for helping me?"

"You'll give me whatever I ask, won't you, Peter?" LaCroix murmured, his mouth forming the words so close to Peter's face that the man cringed backward in an attempt to avoid even the breath of contact.

"No."

The momentary calm was eerie, and actually managed to put a flicker of surprise in LaCroix's pale eyes. His smile turned icy, and the hand that had been resting in the center of Peter's chest suddenly moved to encircle his throat. Peter winced when the pressure of LaCroix's grip began to increase.

"You will never say 'No' to me, Peter," he intoned in a low growl of sound. Before, the objection in the brown eyes could find words, LaCroix's hand dropped away and he smiled. "Your mother is blind, isn't she?"

A jolt of terror stabbed through Peter at the casual mention of Annie Blaisdell, and he shook his head quickly, panic allowing the gesture to escape the pervading paralysis.

"My mother's dead," he gasped.

LaCroix recognized both the truth and the lie in Peter's statement, and he leaned closer, dismissing the attempted contradiction. "Your father is not. I could destroy him, Peter. You have no idea how easily I could alter his existence."

The choice of words sparked new horror in Peter as some small scope of understanding began to work its way into his brain. LaCroix wasn't talking about killing Caine, he was talking about taking away everything that would mean a true death to the Shaolin priest. At that moment, Peter had no doubts about the stranger's ability to do exactly as he claimed.

Before the young detective could find a balance in the sea of terror, LaCroix's mood took him into a new channel of confused responses. The vampire's fingers reached up to trace the smooth, curving contour of Peter's cheek, his touch cool and provocative. The cop's lips clamped together in a twitch of suppressed rejection, and he tried to pull away from the unwelcome caress.

The intensity of LaCroix's eyes grew, until the only thing Peter was consciously aware of was the pale, glowing gaze. He wanted desperately to break away from this man and run, but his limbs refused to cooperate. Peter's entire body felt flooded with some form of tranquilizing drug. The conflict of sensations registered somewhere in his mind, but he was helpless to do anything. His senses were heightened, every tiny sound

and touch enhanced beyond reason, while he was unable to move beyond the sensation. LaCroix's smile filled his vision, and fear crested in his throat with a taste of bile at the unmasked lust in the fiery stare.

LaCroix moved closer to the detective, his body touching the full length of the slender form pressed tightly to the wall. The contact was barely perceptible, yet every part of him responded vividly to Peter, the taste of panic even more exciting than his physical presence. LaCroix felt the pressure of his fangs emerging and he fought back the impulse to simply take possession of Peter Caine. It would be so very easy...

Peter shuddered when LaCroix's hands drifted across his chest, tracing the shape of his torso through the soft material of his t-shirt, then lingering again over his heart. He forced his hands to move, made them rise despite the agony of objection his effort woke inside his head. He pressed his palms to the other man's chest, intending to push him away. LaCroix caught his wrists in a grip that threatened to break bones. A low groan of pain and frustration escaped Peter when LaCroix slammed his hands into the wall on either side of his shoulders.

"No...Please..."

The two words, so softly spoken, were a plea, torn from some part of Peter's soul the detective couldn't control. LaCroix's eyes measured them, then dismissed the request. The trapped body writhed against the vampire, arousing him further as he ducked his head to allow his lips to explore the slim column of Peter's neck. His tongue played over the pulsing vein, and Peter's gasp of startled pleasure made him smile.

Peter tried to ignore his own response to the unwanted caresses, sickened despite the certainty that he was helpless to stop what was happening. He hated the betrayal of his body, some inner ideal insisting he should be feeling nothing but loathing. But, the stirring euphoria was undeniable; he moved against LaCroix, his body obeying its own need.

LaCroix felt the shifting emotions, heard the silent war inside his young victim's head as clearly as if Peter were voicing his confusion. The vampire felt the throb of life and awakening passion against his exploring tongue. He licked the tender skin, then drew away, opening his mouth to reveal gleaming fangs and golden fires burning deep in previously blue eyes. Peter's expression transformed even as LaCroix had, pure, unadulterated terror lighting the handsome young face. He tried to break free of LaCroix's hold. The vampire leaned into his captive, fangs sinking into yielding flesh with a cruel suddenness that made Peter cry out in pain and shock.

Agony seared Peter's throat and he was dimly aware of the rational voice in his mind that assured him he was dreaming all of this. The pain was a lance of fire pouring into his veins, replacing the blood being drawn away. The searing flame receded after a few, eternal seconds, and his body relaxed into the vampire's embrace. His head tilted to one side as ecstasy washed over him, leaving him trembling in LaCroix's arms. He sighed heavily; LaCroix released his hands, and Peter's fingers fisted in the other man's shirt as he now clung to his assailant.



LaCroix felt every tiny shift of emotion, and he drank in the essence of his weakening young victim. Peter's blood flowed through him, igniting the hunger more strongly than he had known in many, many years. He wanted to slake his thirst until there was nothing left in Peter's veins, until every drop of the rich, sweet life flowed through him. His own thought stilled the lust, and he forced himself to pull away. He wanted more for this one, needed much more from him. To gain that end, he would have to be patient, and careful.

Peter slumped forward in LaCroix's arms as the vampire released him. Effortlessly, LaCroix lifted him and carried him to the huge bed that dominated the adjoining room of the suite. He placed Peter on the bed, a soft whisper of sound passing between the parted lips when his hand lingered on Peter's forehead. LaCroix knew he should leave while the young man slept, but he sat down, instead, on the edge of the bed and watched as the pale young face slowly smoothed into exhausted slumber.

The hunger was far from sated, and it took the disciplined will of centuries to resist the temptation to reclaim the young man. The puncture marks on the left side of Peter's neck were an invitation, and LaCroix tore his gaze away from the reminder of how intoxicating the too brief taste of Peter had been.

He smiled as his eyes wandered openly over the slender body, enjoying the well-defined curves and contours. There would be a great deal of pleasure to possessing this one, he thought with satisfaction. But, he would do it right this time. He would not lose Peter as he had his other companion. He reached for the belt buckle and gave it a tug, then began to strip the young detective.

Peter's clothes were tossed into a chair, the useless gun and holster folded on top of them, and LaCroix's gaze was drawn back to the naked form sprawled on the sheets.

He knew he should leave.

Instead, he settled onto the edge of the mattress, fighting a very real hunger that rumbled, unsatisfied, in his belly. Giving in to the urge, he lifted Peter back into his arms, cradling the limp body against his chest, and he sighed at the warmth that radiated into him. The faint, metallic scent of blood touched teasingly at his senses, and he stroked one hand through Peter's sweat dampened dark hair. He felt the faint tremor of reaction that reached him even through deep unconsciousness.

"You will be everything that Nicholas was meant to be, Peter," he whispered, his voice husky. "Everything. Companion, son, lover. We will do things you have never even known existed. I'll show you sights you never imagined, power you can't yet comprehend. I will open the world to you. Forever." He hesitated in the silence of the room, reluctant to make the admission. It came finally, a whispered confession wrenched out of him. "I'm lonely, Peter." He brushed a long, slender fingered hand down the motionless face, stroking a caress along the jaw, down the throat, and across the smooth chest. "You do not understand loneliness. Not yet. But you will. I'm lonely and I'm hungry, and you will feed all my needs."

The reminder of his hunger urged him out of the unaccustomed reverie, and he released Peter, letting him collapse back onto the mattress. Concerned now only with satisfying the need of his own body, he tossed the blankets over the sleeping figure. It took only minutes to remove all traces of his presence from the hotel suite, then he vanished into the night.

Sunrise was only an hour away.

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Despite the lateness of the hour, LaCroix's hunger was consuming his attention with relentless persistence. His brief taste of Peter was like at easing prelude, and it had awakened a need that had much more complex ties than simply hunger. But, for the moment, that need would have to be the one LaCroix answered. He headed for the park that was nearby, certain there would be people wandering the shadowed paths, even at this hour of the night.

It was appallingly easy, he thought with grim satisfaction. The girl was alone, sitting on a bench, crying over some trivial sorrow that no doubt seemed the end of the world to her. LaCroix approached her silently and sat beside her. He could feel the throb of her heartbeat, wildly erratic from the elevated emotional state she was indulging herself in. The scent of blood inflamed his desire.

She looked over at him and he had the impression of a startled hare. Her eyes widened, then fear replaced the sorrow that had caused her tears. He held out his hand and she tried to resist the lure of his gaze. He smiled, enjoying the futility of her protest. Seconds later, she walked from the park with him, curled into the shelter of his shoulder.

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The headache laced its way through his head on a fiery trail of pain, bringing him closer to waking with each pulse. He floated in the darkness-shrouded dreams one last moment before forcing his eyes to open. The nightmare was still there, and his entire body twitched as he finally escaped it by jolting himself fully awake.

The nightmare didn't fade with the return of consciousness.

Peter jerked upright in the bed, then was dropped back to the sweat-soaked sheets by a lance of pain that darted up his neck and into his eyes. For long, tortured minutes, he doubled over, dragging in painful gasps of air. His mind cleared with agonizing slowness, and it finally occurred to him that, if anyone were still in the room, he was an open and inviting target. He forced his eyes open, and recoiled against the sunlight streaming in through the parted drapes. It took an almost superhuman effort to drag his body out of the bed, but rays of light knifing through him compelled him to stumble across the room and yank the curtains shut. The darkness eased some of the pain, and he slumped to the heavy-piled carpet, curling into a ball of misery, his arms hugging his knees. He might have dozed off; he wasn't sure. But it seemed like along time later before he stirred from the position. Again, his first thought was to see if he were still alone. He was. There was no 'feel' of anyone else in the suite--he had

finally remembered where he was, LaCroix's hotel suite--no sound of movement or sense of threat. Only when his mind had sluggishly sifted through those awarenesses did he realize that he was huddled naked in the corner of the bedroom, trembling with cold and residual, half-remembered terror.

He couldn't think past the sludge in his mind, couldn't sort through the conflicting sensations that memory teased him with, and he gave up the effort. Literally crawling, he inched his way back to the bed and found his clothing folded neatly on the suitcase rack at the foot of the mattress. Even his holster and Baretta were there, piled neatly on top of his jacket. Nausea punctuated each movement as he forced leaden limbs to respond enough to pull on his clothes. He didn't even want to think about why he was lying naked in this hotel room, or just how much of the previous night he would ever remember. On cue, fractions of disjointed memory broke in, like snapshots of recollection, flickering through his mind. LaCroix's face, too close, predatory. Terrifying, distorted words threatening those he loved. Peter blinked the image away. Against his will, the face returned, looming like a ghost of horror behind his eyes. The man's eyes, grotesquely yellow, glowing with something preternatural, evil...

He dragged himself onto the bed, half dressed, winded from even that effort. His fingers wouldn't cooperate and the buttons on his shirt eluded them. Flashes of memory kept intruding, stirring up fear and a sense of urgency that was prodding him to get the hell out of the room. The idea of LaCroix returning was enough to panic him, making him even more clumsy and awkward.

Fangs. He could have sworn there had been fangs.

He shook his head. That was ridiculous. He'd been drugged. Or sick. Or maybe he'd finally gone too far over the elusive edge of sanity, spiralling off into some mad dreamscape peopled by monsters and vampires and strangely erotic attacks in elegant hotel suites. He felt, again, the hands wandering over his body, a sensual trial of horrifyingly pleasant sensation, and a shudder rippled up his back as he forced the last of the buttons to close. Heat pulsed through him, followed by a chill that penetrated even through the haze of confusion.

He needed a hospital, though he had no idea what was wrong with him. He needed help, but he was terrified of trusting anyone enough to ask for it. A stray suggestion insinuated itself into the turmoil of these thoughts, to go to the one place he was guaranteed safety--his father. The idea was met by a flood of nausea, and he mentally recoiled from even the possibility of seeking sanctuary in the kwoon. All he really needed...wanted...was to get back to his own apartment, crawl into bed, and ride out whatever the hell was wrong with him.

Through a haze of semi-consciousness, he recorded in a mental file that the suite had been cleared of any sign of occupancy--*except for the body in the bed*, he thought with a near hysterical twist of humor. He'd figure it all out later. Now, all he wanted was to go home. If he could make it that far...

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The climb up the stairs to his apartment was infinite, but Peter forced himself to make the journey--his alternative, passing out in the hallway--wasn't much of an option. His hand shook as he opened the door and stumbled across the threshold. Inside, the first thing he did was cross the room and pull the curtains. Once the apartment was cloaked in a comfortable haze of shadowy grey, he collapsed on the couch and tried to calm the trembling that had him gasping, in spite of the fact that he'd done nothing strenuous.

His eyes closed and he immediately regretted the lapse as his mind was filled with flashes of the previous night. He shuddered against the recollection of his body squirming in an arousal that made him cringe, even while another, deeper part of him accepted the pleasure he'd felt.

"No!"

The word burst from him like a shout, and he dragged his weary body out of its slouch. Running badly shaking hands through his hair, he headed for the shower.

The water poured over him, soothing aches and relaxing cramped muscles. Peter reached for the soap and began to scrub, his hands rough against his skin as he tried to swash away the sensations he'd allowed LaCroix's touch to incite.

*LaCroix.* The name evoked a shiver even as warm water glided over him. *Like a lover's caress, Peter.* He jerked back from the voice, only dimly aware that it had come from within his mind. LaCroix had never said those words, but it was undeniably his voice mocking Peter now.

The detective retreated further as another flash of memory tormented him. He could feel LaCroix's hand over his heart, absorbing the steady throb of life as the ice blue eyes held Peter in a limbo of fear and desire. When the face changed, and fangs filled his vision, Peter whimpered and backed into the smooth, solid wall of the shower. He shook his head in mute denial, his arms crossing his chest in a futile rejection. Tears formed and spilled from his eyes as he huddled against the tiled wall.

LaCroix's laughter filled the tiny space, blending with the steady fall of water. As Peter's consciousness started to spin away, it took every ounce of strength he possessed to cut the flow of water and make it to his bed. He fell face down on the spread, wet and sobbing, then the darkness claimed him.

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A crimson film lined the interior of the bottle. The level had dropped significantly at odd hours during the day, and now there was less than an inch of blood coagulating in the weighted bottom of the crystal decanter. The ringer on the phone had been turned off, another unusual marker to a day that was fading into a spectacular sunset backdropping the city skyline behind drawn curtains. There was a nearly inaudible click as the answering machine fielded still another call with its pre-recorded message, and the faintest echo of a 'beep' sounding through the dregs of Nick's lingering sleep...



*"Yeah, this is Nick Knight. I'm either asleep or incommunicado. Leave a message at the tone."*

Peter never heard the first three rings. The fourth finally intruded on his sleep and one brown eye opened reluctantly to glare as the metallic click announced the machine kicking in. The tiny red light was already blinking frantically with previously ignored messages. Peter half-heard his own voice start its taped spiel. *"This is Peter. I'm out chasing bad guys. Leave a message or a tip at the tone."* He was nearly asleep again when the beep sounded and Frank Strenlich's stentorian voice boomed over the tape.

"Peter, get your ass outta that bed, and answer this damned thing. You're not here, you're not at your Dad's, you're not with Annie, you're not in the toy car, so I know your butt's in the sack. Get it the hell--"

"What?" It was more demand than question, and Peter was surprised by the hoarse croak that passed as his voice.

Startled into momentary silence, Frank stuttered, then demanded, "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"Never mind. Listen, kid, there's been another one."

"Shit."

"Yeah, that about sums it up. Where's your new partner?"

"He's not my partner."

"Okay, where's Knight? That better? Jeez, your attitude's been gettin' a little rough lately, kid. Lighten up, will you?"

"Sorry." Peter scrubbed at his jaw, felt the trace of stubble there and debated shaving before he headed to the station. A rumble woke in his stomach and he tried to remember his last meal. The thought of food was quickly followed by a rush of bile and a surge of nausea that crested in his throat. He barely managed not to retch right there in the bed. "Look, Chief, I gotta get cleaned up, then I'll be there. I'll get hold of Nick."

"We've been trying to reach both of you all night, Peter. You sure you're okay? That was a hell of a wallop you took the other night. You might want to--"

"Damn it! I said I was all right."

"Relax, Peter. I just asked."

"Yeah, I'm sorry." It seemed half his conversations started and ended with apologies lately. "You got anything on this latest body?"

"Nothing much. Female, we're guessing about twenty years old. It's as messy as the others, but that's about all I know now. Look, get down here and we'll handle details and see what the forensics people have come up with."

"On my way."

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The rustle of silk marked his return to consciousness as the fourth ring was interrupted by the answering machine. Nick pushed his body into sitting position, a tiny shiver of pleasant response whispering down his

spine as the smooth, cool material of his pajamas caressed his skin. He ran slender fingers through the golden tangle of his hair, and glanced at the machine.

Nick turned up the volume and waited until the message light started flashing again before he stumbled out of bed and crossed the room to the phone. He stabbed at the replay button on his way past it, then let the messages provide background noise while he rummaged in the refrigerator. He was getting low. Bottles clinked together as he pushed them aside and made a mental tally of his stock. He'd have to...

Peter Caine's voice was the last one on the tape. The kid sounded drunk or semi-conscious. Not surprising, Nick thought with a sour taste in his mouth. He forced some of the kinks out of his back with a languid, muscle popping stretch of his long body, and picked up the phone. Caine's phone had already been put back on automatic, so all he got was the machine on that end. He left an answering message that he'd be there in an hour, and headed back to the bathroom.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was well after nine o'clock when Nick let himself into Peter's apartment. Repeated calls and pounding on the door hadn't brought the kid out of his stupor, leaving Knight no choice but to break in. He had no doubts about Peter being in the apartment--what worried Nick was the shape he'd find his partner in.

He wasn't reassured when he entered the bedroom, tripped over Peter's discarded boots, and spotted the figure sprawled on the bed. At some point in the day, Peter had tried to get dressed. He'd managed to get into his jeans, and one arm was clothed by a shirtsleeve--the rest of the garment was crumpled under Peter's unconscious body. Nick crossed the room and took a seat on the edge of the bed.

In a distant part of his mind, Peter felt the other presence in his bedroom. For a fleeting moment, terror pricked at the back of his mind, and he heard the broken cry that slipped from his lips as he pried his eyes open. Expecting to see LaCroix poised over him, he trembled with relief when Nick's face slowly emerged from the fog of his vision and came into focus.

"What...?"

The unspoken question spun away before Peter could define what it was he wanted to know. Knight gave him a nudge and pushed him over onto his back, then waited out the gasps for air that shouldn't have been so difficult for the kid to draw in.

"How long have you been like this, Peter?"

The voice was like a lifeline, and Peter shook his head, partly in answer, partly in an effort to clear the haze that blurred his thoughts.

"Peter?" Nick punctuated the demand with a strong grip on the other man's chin, and he forced the brown gaze to meet his.

"I think it's just the flu or something," Peter said, swiping uselessly at the hand. Knight refused to be put off.

"Since when does the flu leave marks like this?" Nick snapped, turning Peter's head away to expose the puncture marks on the side of his throat. The wounds were raw and angry looking; Nick knew they'd been made less than twenty-four hours earlier. At the hotel, he realized, the hindsight making a great many of the night's inconsistencies fall into a semblance of logical order.

"Why don't you just get the fuck outta my apartment, Knight!" Peter hissed in fury. This time when he pulled away from the detective, Nick's hand closed like a vise on his arm, and held him pinned to the bed.

"Who did this to you?" Nick asked, deliberately keeping his tone casual and absurdly conversational.

"You're joking."

"I'm quite serious, Peter. You'd make a lousy vampire, kid. Trust me-- I know."

That didn't make a whole lot of sense, Peter thought. Of course, reason wasn't exactly guiding this conversation, anyway. What the hell was going on? His new partner was calmly sitting on his bed discussing an ancient myth like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I thought I was the one with the concussion." Peter tried to make light of the dread that was settling into his stomach.

Nick wasn't going to be brushed off, however. He watched the emotions chasing across Peter's expressive face, and his heart filled with a sadness he rarely experienced any more. This kid was far too innocent to be used like this. In spite of his attempts to prove he was as tough as the next cop, Peter Caine was much too idealistic and trusting. He didn't have the instinct necessary to survive what he'd become if whoever was preparing him was able to complete bringing him across. Anger rose in Nick, then, reminding him that Peter's lack of trust in him was partly to blame for the young man's danger.

Knight reached out and clasped the detective's wrist, his fingers searching for a pulse. It took him a moment to find the tiny throb; it was dangerously slow. Again, Peter tried to snatch his hand back--and, as before, Nick maintained his hold. He peeled away the bandage that was still wrapped around Peter's wrist. A single glance assured him of another set of punctures, despite the effort to disguise the marks with the gash wound.

"Who did this to you?" Knight repeated, this time locking his gaze with Peter's and reaching for the young man's thoughts.

Peter felt the probe without knowing exactly what it was Nick's compelling eyes were searching for. He broke the hypnotic hold with an almost physically painful effort.

"I'm fine!" He snarled, no longer aware of the alien sound of his voice. "Now, would you mind explaining what the hell you're doing in my apartment, sitting on my bed? You're cute, but trust me, you're not my type!" Almost as a mocking reminder, LaCroix's leering countenance drifted before his eyes. He shuddered when his body recalled the touch of the older man's hands brushing across his chest, and the even more frightening response of his own hips thrusting into LaCroix as he back Peter into the unyielding resistance of the wall.

Nick saw the reaction before Peter could consciously submerge it. Obviously, there had been something strongly sexual in the encounter with the vampire responsible for Peter's condition. No surprise there. There usually was. Because of the unwanted intimacy of their situation, the younger man was having an extremely difficult time accepting Nick's concern. Knight decided it was time to back off. He rose and headed for the door.

"Get dressed, Peter, your father wants to see you before we head to the station." He didn't give the kid time to object as he walked into the living room to wait.

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The drive to Caine's kung fu academy was made in virtual silence. That fact alone made Nick edgy; silence was not Peter's style. When Knight pulled up to the curb outside the building, Peter made no effort to get out of the car. He stared at the door, and Nick got the distinct impression the young detective was measuring his chances of getting away before Nick could force him inside.

As if sensing the scrutiny, Peter turned a baleful glare on Nick, then wrenched open the car door. He was on the sidewalk only a heartbeat ahead of Nick.

"The idea is to go inside, Peter," Knight admonished softly. "Or, would you prefer I brought your father out to you?" He added the last with a hint of challenge.

Peter's glare settled firmly into place and he stalked toward the door, flinging it open before he stormed into the tranquility of the candlelit kwoon.

"You wanted to see me," he stated harshly without preamble, once his father had set aside his flute and risen from his seat on the floor.

The abruptness, coupled with the edge of steel were a shock to the priest and he glanced back at the man who stood in the shadows at Peter's back. Nick said nothing, yet, but Caine knew he was watching every shift of Peter's presence.

"I was concerned," Caine acquiesced with a slight bow of his head.

"I told you I was fine," Peter snapped. "I've been telling everyone that for days! What the hell is wrong with you, Pop? Is the whole fucking world out to dog my steps because I got tossed into a wall?"

Nick felt the anger rising and ebbing away, leaving only confusion within Peter as he tried to reconcile his feelings with the outburst of misplaced anger. The young man's eyes filled with misery when his words settled into the awkward silence, and it was only when Caine reached out to place a hand on his son's arm that Knight realized the latent danger.

"Back off!" Peter hissed, managing to avoid his father's touch as if it were lethal. Some part of his mind insisted that it might be precisely that.

Caine's eyes sought Nick's, and this time there was enough demand in the hazel depths that Knight felt compelled to answer. He stepped forward, his own gaze never leaving Peter.



"Someone is preparing to bring him across, Master Caine. He is becoming a vampire."

"Jesus!" Peter's voice was an angry expulsion of air. He paced the floor, then turned a sneering, contemptuous look to his partner. "You're really losing it, Knight. Have you been going to too many movies, or what?"

"The one responsible for the transformation is old, and very powerful," Nick continued, ignoring Peter's words. "Peter is dying. If we don't stop what's happening, free him from the hold on his mind, he'll become a vampire--"

--a creature of the night. A demon from whatever hell you can create," Peter snarled. "This is a police investigation, not a Bram Stoker novel. You're startin' to believe that name we have for this asshole. Either that, or you're some kind of lunatic who slipped by the psych tests at the Academy."

Caine hesitated, measuring the truth he saw in Knight's eyes against his own beliefs. Another look into Peter's face was all it took to convince him that Nicholas was telling him the truth, no matter how unbelievable it seemed.

Peter saw the acceptance in his father's implacable features and rage rose within him. When Caine reached out again to touch him, Peter reacted in a purely instinctive move. He caught Caine's extended hand and hurled the startled priest toward the nearest wall.

Impressions became a jumbled blur in the seconds that followed his violence. Peter barely registered the low moan of pain when his father tumbled into a table filled with candles. His own pain seared him as surely as the flickering tapers burned Caine. For one terrible moment, Peter froze in stricken horror, then he turned to flee, unable to face what he'd done to his father.

He actually managed to take a single step before he was flung back by a blow that threatened to break his jaw. Stars burst before his eyes, then winked out one by one as agony smothered him with a cloak of darkness. His father's voice, uncharacteristically loud with a frantic plea, was the last thing Peter was aware of as he sank into the void of nothingness.

Caine turned just in time to see Nick's swing send his son flailing into the opposite wall. His desperate "No!" went unheeded by the detective, and he climbed to a shaky stand. He quelled the immediate urge to retaliate, knowing the other man could not only deflect the attack, but that he'd only struck in defense of Caine, himself. Legs still shaky, Caine staggered to Peter's side, taking a position opposite Nick as the blond man knelt beside the crumpled body.

"What must be done?" Caine asked, reading, correctly, the reflection of his own grief in Knight's eyes.

"There's not a lot of time, Master Caine," Nick eventually answered. "If we had that luxury, I could make it easier on him."

"What must be done?" Caine repeated, the firmness of his tone dissuading the last traces of reluctance in Nick.

"The only way to sever the tie quickly is to cause Peter enough pain that nothing can cut through it. He's half turned, and the only thing I can think of that will cause enough agony is holy water." He winced at the consideration, partly for Peter's sake, partly from his own aversion. "It's also the fastest way to know when we've been successful."

"There is no other way?" Caine didn't want it to be a question, but love demanded that he at least ask for an alternative. He couldn't suppress the guilt he felt as he considered accepting Nick's assertions regarding their course of action.

"I don't know," Nick admitted. "I couldn't get him to tell me who did this to him. I don't know how long it's been happening."

Caine nodded and his gaze dropped. He looked into the beloved features, seeing only the beauty and goodness of his child. If he refused to accept Knight's knowledge, he'd lose Peter again. But, the loss would be vastly complicated this time. Death, true death, would not separate them. His weakness would condemn his son to a darkness far greater than death. He looked into Nick's eyes, read a small part of the anguish the other man lived with, and his decision was made.

"I know a place," Caine whispered. "We will be safe--each of us," he added with a smile. When Nick started to rise, Caine stopped him with a light touch on the detective's arm.

"Thank you."

Nick shook his head, unwilling to accept the priest's gratitude. "We may destroy him, Master Caine."

Caine nodded, accepting the possibility with his customary fatalism, despite the agony that it created within him.

"Then, he will die my son," Caine whispered, "not a stranger."

"Or, something like me," Nick added, more to himself than to the Shaolin master. He felt only the merest trace of uncertainty when he realized how freely he'd given his secret to the priest, then it vanished into the ironic knowledge that Caine would have known what he was from the moment they'd met. The lack of judgment from the other man was welcome, but it still didn't prepare Nick for Caine's next words.

"He is as you once were, Nicholas," Caine murmured. He looked deeply into the blue eyes and a hint of knowing smile touched his face. As you remain."

Startled, Nick stared at the other man for several seconds. Caine waited out the silence, then, in the same motion, they rose. Nick gathered Peter into his arm and headed for the door. Caine followed.

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His sleep had been troubled, restless for the first time in many, many years. LaCroix's eyes were brooding as he surveyed the activity within the nightclub, but they saw nothing of the people moving within the crowded room. His finger caressed the rim of his crystal glass, and he tried again to establish some form of link to Peter. He was so close. There should be some whisper of Peter's spirit answering his call. The lack of any touch troubled him.

A few more hours, LaCroix decided. It was possible the boy was still sound asleep, recovering from their encounter of the previous night. If Peter hadn't come to him within a few hours, LaCroix would go and claim his prize. Either way, Peter Caine would be his before dawn. The thought pleased him tremendously, enough that he left his solitude and went down into the club's main room to wait.

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The small chapel was located near the edge of the city, a tiny structure set within a circle of graves. Nick sensed Caine's concern as the priest registered his shiver of apprehension.

"Are you sure this place hasn't ben desecrated?" Nick asked, the apparent improbability of something this isolated being left intact forcing the question from him.

"It is very old," Caine assured him. "But, it has not been disturbed in the way you mean."

As it had in the studio, the priest's calm acceptance unnerved Nick, and he found he was staring at Caine in wonder. Not a feeling he was used to experiencing anymore. He felt Peter stirring between them in their mutual support, and he tightened his hold on the detective. Caine nodded at the unspoken decision and they headed through the ancient wrought iron gates that granted entrance with a squeal of protest when Knight pushed them aside.

Peter was waking enough to become aware of his surroundings, and the knowledge that he was being dragged into a church was doing nothing toward keeping him calm. Nick was fighting his own aversion as well. Only Caine's intractable serenity kept him moving toward the crumbling edifice.

A single push was all it took to open the door leading into the small chapel. A shudder rippled along Nick's spine as his look travelled over the dusty interior. There were no pews, only simple wooden benches. The altar was also made of wood, carved with love by hands long dead. Caine had been right; the tiny place was reasonably intact, and Nick could feel the pull on his senses that assured him no evil had destroyed the spirit of the chapel.

"This way," Caine directed, a nod indicating the front of the church. He pulled an increasingly resistant Peter with him, and the young detective had no choice but follow when Knight tightened his hold and propelled him after his father.

Caine released Peter, trusting Nick's strength to keep his son safe and restrained. A search of the area behind the altar offered Caine several moments to compose his own thoughts, and to gather the strength he knew he would need to get through the upcoming ordeal. He had sensed something powerful and ancient when he'd first seen the visiting police officer, but even Caine could not have anticipated this nightmare as the truth of the other's existence. That his son was being drawn into the cycle of hellish darkness sparked a genuine terror within the soul of Kwai Chang Caine. Nothing in his lifetime of experience could prepare him for

the devastation of spirit when he considered what his son was about to go through to reclaim his freedom.

Peter was already terrified; Caine felt the escalating fright as his son slowly regained full consciousness.

The items he needed were found in the tiny Sacristy and he carried them back to Nick, his eyes searching Peter's panicked stare, even as he held out his hands to Knight.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Master Caine?" Nick knew he could hardly manage what was necessary on his own, but he wanted to give the priest at least the appearance of an option. He could find someone else who would help, Nick had no doubts in that respect. His fingers bit into the hard muscles of Peter's arms as the kid gave a tentative pull away from him, testing the strength of the grip and the determination of the man holding him.

"There is no other way," Caine replied. "I wish to have my son back. I will not lose him another time."

There was a world of misery in the soft words and admission of a fear Nick understood too well. If death freed Peter's spirit, Caine would find that essence again even if it took a lifetime of searching; the horror LaCroix had introduced to Peter would taint him for an eternity. There would never be peace, only death and bloodshed.

As the vampire's thoughts drifted, Caine's eyes never left the pale features. He felt a lance of pure agony tear through him a moment later, and Nick's golden hair and handsome features were obliterated by a crimson wave. For the first time, Caine saw the haunted past of the vampire, covered in the blood of a thousand deaths, scarlet with the lives he'd taken so carelessly. Whispers of the eternity before Nicholas Knight had sought to reclaim his own humanity. As the surge receded, Caine swayed, and Nick's hand reached out to steady him. Caine accepted the offer with a bow of his head, then placed the tiny vials of holy water on the altar.

"Peter?"

Peter's eyes narrowed, and he glared at his father, hatred coloring his normally gentle features.

"Why can't you just leave me alone, damn it!"

"I can...not," Caine offered, his heart torn by the alien expression in his son's face, despite his knowledge that this was not truly Peter who stared back at him.

Peter's anger shot out when he felt Nick pressing him down to the floor, and he struggled furiously against the inexorable pressure. Nick's grip slipped away and, for a moment, Peter thought he was free. Caine's hands on his shoulders held him long enough for the other detective to regain his lost balance, then Peter was slammed onto the hardwood floor, and Knight was at his back.

Nick closed his arms around Peter's chest and nodded to Caine. The Shaolin priest hesitated, and Nick's face hardened, his normally gentle expression becoming brittle with anger.



"If you want your son back, priest, you have no other choice!" Nick commanded, deliberately suppressing the twinge of conscience his words woke.

Caine ignored the barb, fully aware that it cost Nick more than it did Caine. He picked up the first vial of blessed water and pried the cap off the container. Nick's fingers bruised the skin of Peter's wrists as he turned the hands over and held them exposed to Caine.

"No!" Peter whispered in a thrill of genuine terror. "Please, Father? No!"

Caine swallowed against the threat of tears and carefully tilted the vial. Peter's scream of agony rose in the night air, echoing within the closed confines of the building. His entire body arched outward, as he strained to free himself from the relentless strength of Knight's embrace. He gasped hoarsely, moaning as the water seared his skin and left it raw and swollen. The faint hiss of sound magnified in the small, closed building, and Caine swayed at the backlash of his son's pain. Nick closed his eyes and held the thrashing man until he collapsed back against Nick's chest, heaving with the effort to draw air into his tortured lungs.

"Father..."

The single word was a plea for mercy that Caine could not grant. The second drops would hurt more than these had, and it took every ounce of the priest's discipline to maintain his resolve. He reached out and brushed a caress across the feverish forehead of his son.

Peter murmured, an unintelligible whisper of sound, then jerked away from the touch.

Nick brushed a finger over the charred flesh of Peter's wrist, wincing when he saw the worst of the damage centered on the wrist he'd bared earlier that evening. The water coursing over those would have been a blistering agony. Despite the knowledge that it would only help to sever the hold sooner, Nick found he was unable to deliberately inflict a pain of that magnitude again. He decided to spare Peter the anguish of another burn, and he awkwardly tore a strip from his own shirt. He bound the wrist and glanced at Caine. The hazel eyes were eerily calm.

"Give yourself some time to recover, too," Nick suggested. *Then we'll do it again, and again, until we've destroyed ourselves...or him.*

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The first scream echoed in some deep, hidden recess of his brain, like twinge of headache that could be almost ignored...almost.

LaCroix's hand trembled against the wine glass. The raven haired woman with him didn't notice the momentary lapse of control, so quickly was it countered.

"Go," he said, the word breathed out in a gasp of air. The second scream reverberated in his mind, waking twinges of pain deep in his body, the bond still intact, still deeply rooted in his own essence.

"Wait a minute," the brunette protested, the lipstick smudged on her perfect lips the only giveaway to her beyond-tipsy status. She felt her intentions of spending the rest of the night with this affluent looking man

slipping just beyond her grasp. Another damn night alone. And she had real plans for this one. He looked like he was worth the extra effort. "I thought we had--"

"We have nothing," he snapped, with a brusque wave of one hand.

"Damn you," she spat at him. "Who the hell do you think you are? Damn royalty? you can't just sit there and dismiss me, you fuck!"

*Amazing*, LaCroix thought absently, *how a beautiful woman can turn into a slut just by opening her mouth*. "Go, before I suck the blood out of you, whore," he whispered with a smile that slid easily into a contemptuous sneer.

"Right," she growled, then got to her feet. She spun on one spiked heel, and stalked across the crowded dance floor, never once realizing that she had narrowly escaped just exactly that fate.

Watching her vanish into the smoke-laden room, LaCroix twisted the wine glass in one hand, idly watching the swirl of blood-red Chardonnay coat the crystal.

Someone was trying to reclaim Peter.

There were few people who would even know how to try. Fewer people who could succeed. Nicholas was one of those people.

He paused, felt nothing else, then drained the glass. He would have to wait, the first contact hadn't been enough to give him a sense of where to find Peter.

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The night drew on endlessly as they repeated the torture they hoped would eventually free Caine's son. Nick's eyes were dazed, as if the shocks of relentless agony that arced through Peter had translated to a like pain within Knight's soul. Caine did not doubt for an instant that the blond detective was suffering his own form of horror as they tried desperately to save Peter.

Peter stirred from another of the restless fits of unconsciousness that he'd fallen into throughout the night. He twitched in Knight's arms, then tried to struggle into an upright position. As exhaustion had slowly stolen Peter's strength, Nick had been forced to hold him to the wooden floor each time Caine poured the water over his exposed arms. Peter's jacket had been discarded and thrown across the altar after the first shock had taken his awareness from him.

"No more," Peter begged when he saw the familiar form of his father and the hated vial of clear poison Caine held in shaky hands. Through the blanket of dazed confusion, Peter couldn't recall ever seeing his father's hands shake like they did now.

"I must, my son," Caine murmured, wanting the absolution of seeing some understanding in the young man's brown eyes. The only emotion he was able to discern was the reawakened terror, and the rage that had accompanied every waking moment Peter had endured since entering the church.

"It should have ended at the Temple," Peter hissed, not sure himself if it were his life, or Caine's, that he'd referred to. If he thought the words

would halt his father's actions, he was wrong. Nick's unbreakable fingers turned his arms again, and the sight of the welts burned into his flesh from wrist to elbow infuriated Peter with a rage that was lethal.

"You're trying to kill me." He snarled the words as he kicked out a his father, trying to connect with something more substantial than air. "Is that what you want? To watch me die?"

Caine felt his heart being torn from his chest, and he saw the warning in Nick's blue eyes. Peter was once again attempting to distract his father's intention, using guilt as only a child can against the parents who love them. The deliberate tactic, so uncharacteristic of Peter, strengthened Caine rather than dissuading him. He dropped to his knees and opened and opened another of the vials of water.

"I hate you!" Peter growled, his voice, raw from screaming, barely recognizable to the two men with him.

Caine flinched, and his vision blurred into a watery haze, but he tilted the vial and choked in a sob at the strangled howl of pain torn from Peter. The water, once again, burned into the pale skin, singeing the surface until it bubbled and blistered. Peter's struggle was more intense this time, his long legs thrashing as he snarled in fury and agony. Caine shuddered at the alien sounds coming from his son, the animal madness that possessed him.

Knight had to call up more of his own unnatural strength as the detective in his arms bucked wildly in an effort to escape his grasp. Another keening shriek reverberated in the hollow building when Caine's hand turned a second time and seared the other wrist.

Nick moaned in startled pain when the clear drops spilled from Peter's arm to fall onto the exposed skin of his own arm. Clenching his teeth, he choked back the scream that teased the back of his throat. He could smell the scent of charred flesh, knew it was his own, and his stomach roiled against the pain as well as the sight of the blackened skin.

"I am sorry," Caine said, appalled by the accident.

Nick shook his head, then forced his teeth to unclench so he could speak.

"It was an accident, Master Caine. Nothing more. And, it will heal quickly." The words had a hoarse, gasped quality to them, and Knight felt a chill pass over him when Peter's laughter burst forth.

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The glass shattered in his hand, blood red drops of wine staining his fingers. Another silent screech of agony rang in the darkest recesses of his mind.

LaCroix was sweating now, and it had nothing to do with the heaving mass of bodies that surrounded him, unnoticed, in the packed club.

He felt Peter's anguish, knew his exhaustion, knew he was weakening. The bond between them shimmered like a dying light in his mind. The further Knight moved from the sphere of LaCroix's influence, the more powerful his own shielding became.

It was almost ironic.

Peter had been selected as Nicholas' substitute; now it was Nicholas who sought to steal him away.

And he was succeeding. LaCroix could feel it; the boy was being torn from him with Knight's usual, implacable determination, literally ripped from the only partially-completed union. It wasn't enough that Nicholas had severed the bond that united them, now he was claiming his replacement even before LaCroix could fully savor their merging. The remembered feel of the helpless, slender boy pressed beneath his own was a torment, an aching void of desire.

Shaking the droplets of wine off his hand, he rose and followed the no longer elusive sense of both Peter and Nick into the waning darkness.

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Nick could feel the approach of dawn, and he shifted uncomfortably, Peter's weight balanced once again in his arms. The dark hair was damp with sweat, and Nick could feel the heat of fever radiating from the man. Peter's face was turned into Nick's neck, and Knight smiled weakly when he caught a glimpse of Caine's hazel eyes watching them closely. Allowing Nick to restrain Peter had cost the priest dearly, and Knight had no illusions about the trust his acceptance implied. If Caine had thought for an instant that Knight would be a danger to his son, Nick would never have gotten near the man. He certainly wouldn't be holding the kid as he slept.

"You up to another round?" Nick asked, dreading the thought as much as Caine clearly did. But, for Nick, time was becoming a precious commodity.

Caine seemed to comprehend the undercurrent of urgency in the request, and he nodded. Knight saw the tremor ripple through the priest's body as he climbed to his feet. None of the graceful precision he'd grown accustomed to seeing was in evidence as Caine moved now, and for the first time, Knight noticed the depth of pain this ordeal was causing the priest. Caine looked old to Nick, aged literally overnight by his son's agony.

"He will be reclaimed, Master Caine," Nick offered in a voice that was little more than a hoarse whisper of sound. Nick wanted to believe that as much as the kid's father did.

Caine accepted the reassurance in silence, then knelt in front of Peter again. Nick shook the young detective awake and, slowly, some of the haze cleared in the brown eyes, to be replaced by wariness. Peter had given up pleading with them to stop what they were doing to him, and he no longer hurled curses at his father. It was the only positive sign that Caine had seen through the long night. When he hadn't been torturing his son, Caine had been praying for his salvation. When tears flooded Peter's eyes at the sight of the vial, Caine felt a spark of genuine hope--the response was the first truly human one he'd seen in hours.

Nick sensed the change, and he, too, risked allowing a surge of relief. When he turned Peter's burned arms up, an unnatural offering, there was only an instinctive twitch of objection. The fear was more than reasonable under the circumstances.



"Father?"

Caine halted at the hoarse whisper and stared into his son's eyes. One hand reached out to touch the tear-dampened cheek and the priest smiled, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry," Peter told him, only distantly aware of the reason he apologized. His heart told him it was necessary, though, and he obeyed the instinct.

"There is no reason," Caine whispered. He looked away from the unconscious plea in Peter's eyes and he poured the water, bracing himself for the reactive scream.

The holy water ran freely over the skin, and Peter sagged back into Knight's embrace. All he felt was the coolness of the water, and he shivered as the liquid soothed the heat of his skin.

"It's over," Nick told them. "Whatever gods you pray to have decided to answer this time, Caine." Urgency goaded him on, not giving him the respite of enjoying his own relief. "He's still vulnerable. We have to get him someplace safe, before whoever did this to him sabotages his freedom."

Within the circle of his embrace, Nick felt the sobs begin, the only release Peter's weakened body could allow him. Tears streamed down the pale cheeks and Knight very gently released Peter into his father's arms.

"The sun will rise very soon," Caine noted, his relief tainted by concern for the other detective.

"We still have to get him--" Nick's words halted abruptly, and fear rocked through him. He whirled, facing the door, and the shadow hovering there. Countless emotions raced through him as he was finally faced with the reality of LaCroix's presence. After the initial shock passed, he found he was still able to move.

LaCroix stood just outside the door, his eyes raking over Nick as the blond vampire stood, rallied his scattered senses, and stepped in front of the two mortals. *So, Knight will be Peter's champion in this battle.* He should have known before now; he should have been certain from the moment he'd spotted them together. Yet, there had been that fragile thread of hope remaining, the almost whimsical wish that Nick would not force LaCroix to destroy him. The delicate strand snapped with a quivering sigh, and the space that separated the two vampires became an impassable chasm.

With a smile that promised it was far from over, LaCroix bowed to Nick, then turned away in a swirl of cape and shadows.

Nick felt the malevolence of the unspoken threat, heard LaCroix's unspoken warning--promise. He dismissed it as he turned to face Caine. There were more immediate things to be taken care of before the sun drove him to his own sleep.

"He'll be safe here," Nick suggested when he saw Caine was preparing to leave.

"He will also be safe at my studio."

"Not as--"

Caine stopped the flow of words with a shake of his head. "I am a priest, Nicholas. The studio is a place of worship, as well as a place of study. He will have the same spiritual protection that this chapel offers."

Nick was far from convinced, but he didn't have time to argue. Sunrise was less than an hour away.

"I have to go," he said, apology in the words. "I'll have time to leave you at the academy." Even as he made the assertion he wondered if he truly did have the time to spare. He'd make the time, and it would be enough, he decided. He leaned forward and helped Caine raise a weaving Peter to a trembling stand.

Caine nodded his understanding, and they headed for the door.

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The trip back to the academy was made quickly and quietly. Nick's mind was filled with endless questions about the ghost from his past. He'd known all along, though, hadn't he? Some inner instinct had whispered LaCroix's name from the start. And Nick had chosen to ignore the warning. Something he should have learned years earlier not to do.

The dark reverie was interrupted by their arrival at Caine's studio. Knight cut the ignition and got out of the car. He reached back to take Peter from Caine's supporting embrace, easily lifting the man and carrying him inside as Caine led the way. He continued to follow the Shaolin priest up to the second level apartment that served as Caine's home.

"I can make him comfortable, Master Caine," Nick began, his tone one of near reluctance. When Caine's shrewd eyes met his, he completed the statement. "I can also insure he remains safely asleep until this is over."

Caine measured the words and the implications of the things he knew Nick wasn't voicing. "You intend to face him alone."

"I intend to put an end to the killing and the threat to your son" Nick corrected, though it was a fine line distinction, at best.

"I will be waiting for you tonight," Caine decided.

"Wait a minute," Nick began, only to be interrupted by the priest.

"You have given me back my son, Nicholas. I will not allow you to pay for that gift with your own life."

"Aren't we overlooking something?" Knight remarked dryly. "My life was over centuries ago. Peter needs you here. If LaCroix tries to get to him, he'll be safe with your presence. A priest is a powerful enemy against our kind."

"The Ancient is a priest also."

"You have no idea of what danger there is in confronting this one, Master Caine."

For several seconds, Caine remained silent, then he looked down at Peter's face, seeing the peace of exhausted sleep. He didn't glance back up at Knight when he spoke again.

"You said you could help him?"

Nick knew the conversation had just been closed by the priest, and he bristled in annoyance. The kid definitely got his stubborn streak from his father.

"Yes, I can." Conscious of the lack of time, Nick knelt beside the cot. He sifted through his memory, concentrated on a technique he hadn't employed in almost a hundred years. A hint of memory teased at his mind; the American Civil War raging around him, men dying despite his desperate attempts to save them, and the flow of too much blood. LaCroix had been there then, too.

He shook off the memory and touched Peter's face, waiting for the fluttering lids to open and allow the brown eyes to focus on him. He smiled, the expression one of warm reassurance. Then he bent closer, his eyes compelling and hypnotic. His voice dropped to a soothing, luring low purr of sound, and he spoke.

"Peter, can you hear me? You do not feel the pain. You do not feel the pain." He saw the hint of response in the drowsy eyes, and he nodded as his thumb continued its soft stroking against Peter's temple. "You will sleep now...for days. You will rest and you will feel nothing." A barely perceptible nod met the words, and Nick smiled once more before he closed the now-vacant dark eyes with exquisite gentleness.

"I have to go," he said, renewed urgency making him conscious of the agitation in his voice.

Caine bowed his head. "Until tonight," he said softly.

Nick didn't bother trying to fight the priest; he had a feeling Caine would find him if he didn't come back at sunset. He nodded, making no effort to masquerade his displeasure, then he slipped from the kwoon.

The first glowing rays of morning sunshine were reaching across the landscape when Knight slipped into his bed with a weary sigh.

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Caine looked around in veiled suspicion as he and Nick made their way to the rear of the silent club. Hellfyre was closed to the general public tonight, but Caine and Nick had been granted entrance as soon as the detective's car had pulled up outside the place. The watchful eyes of the assembled 'guests' was unnerving. At the rear table, hidden in partial shadow, LaCroix watched their approach.

One of the more foolhardy young vampires made a step toward Caine, only to be driven back by the savage hiss of fury that came without warning from Nick. Caine looked mildly surprised at the reaction, then turned his attention to the man now in front of them. LaCroix's steady stare was cold, tinged with faint contempt. It was difficult to know if the emotion was directed at them, or at the ineffectual boy who had tried to block their approach. The priest felt a shudder of cold dread when he met the unfathomable blue eyes and the death that resided in their depths.

"I've been expecting you, Nicholas," LaCroix murmured, offering them seats at the table.

"Call off your pets," Nick directed. "Before I decide to reward them for the rash of killings they've indulged in recently."

"Reward them in any fashion you wish, Nicholas," LaCroix offered with a laugh. He turned speculative eyes toward Caine, and abruptly changed the subject. "I hadn't anticipated the presence of a priest."

"This is Peter Caine's father," Nick told him, certain that the information was unnecessary, but falling into the polite game anyway.

The mention of Peter sparked a flicker of reaction on the austere features, and Nick sensed the familiar tingle of warning along his spine. LaCroix's anger was dangerous; it always had been and his icy stare was a silent admonishment to Nick to tread carefully.

"I hadn't expected to find you here, Nicholas," he said quietly, all but ignoring Caine's silent presence. The priest had no effect at all on LaCroix's composure, not as he did on the others scattered about the club.

Nick didn't bother asking the question that observation demanded; there would be plenty of time for answers after he'd settled the current problem of Peter's safety. Wondering about LaCroix's return had chased Nick into his sleep, and despite the twenty-four hours that had passed since he'd come face to face with the other vampire, Nick still found himself mentally denying the possibility of his mentor's existence.

"Peter Caine is not--"

"I'm not a fool, Nicholas," LaCroix interrupted sharply. "Don't presume to treat me like one!" Again, there was the glitter of warning in LaCroix's ice blue eyes. The expression changed in a flow of transforming features, and LaCroix's smile was even more frightening than his reproaches. "Where is Peter, Nicholas?"

Knight didn't miss the threat contained in the words, and he placed a steadying hand on Caine's arm as he felt the priest tense.

"Out of your reach, LaCroix," he answered quietly. "As I intend for him to stay."

"You know better than to fight me, Nicholas. You always lose."

Nick countered. "Not always."

"Nicholas." LaCroix's tone became chiding. "I am here. What more proof do you need?"

"Stay away from Peter Caine."

LaCroix's eyes grew thoughtful, and his smile became genuine. He leaned forward and touched Nick's hair in a barely perceptible caress. "I will do as you ask, Nicholas. But, you know my price."

The statement hardly came as a surprise to Nick; if anything, he'd have been shocked to not be met with this bargain. Caine's movement drew his attention from LaCroix and he turned to see the priest's eyes dark with anger that seemed totally out of place in his serene features.

"You cannot do this, Nicholas," Caine said softly. "You have fought too long to be free of this man."

Nick let bitterness taint his answering smile. "You said it yourself, Master Caine. Peter's your son, and he'd never survive this version of 'life'." When it looked like the other man would object further, Knight shook his head. "I have a thousand years to undo this decision. Nothing's going to change for me, not in Peter's lifetime. I want him to have that life; he's fought for the things he cherishes, too. He deserves the time to enjoy them. Time to find his father's love and spirit, again. Your life, and his, are little more than a heartbeat's space of time to me. I have eternity, Caine." He realized as he spoke that he was telling LaCroix he had no intention of



holding up his end of their agreement--not long term, at any rate. But, he also knew the years he was willing to sacrifice would be considered enough time to make him change his mind--LaCroix's arrogance would allow him nothing less than to believe he could sway Nick's decision toward meeting his desires.

"This mortal child means too much to you, Nicholas," LaCroix interjected, his tone teasing, mildly contemptuous of the weakness he perceived the attachment to be.

"You should be grateful that he does," Nick pointed out with a smile. "Otherwise we wouldn't be having this discussion, LaCroix."

The other vampire nodded, the only concession he allowed as he awaited Caine's reaction Caine's reaction.

Caine felt the chill working through his body as he watched the pain in Knight's eyes reach darker depths. The blond was once more contemplating the loss of everything he sought to regain. Caine knew there was no way to argue, not if he expected to keep his son safe from LaCroix's evil. The understanding did nothing to make the choice an easier one to accept. He rose slowly, and Nick did the same, standing before the Shaolin priest with a smile that was genuinely warm.

"I thank you again for the life of my son," Caine whispered. Then he bowed low before Nick. When he straightened, he touched a gentle hand to the blond's cheek. "You have no need to search for a humanity that you have never lost, Nicholas."

As they watched the priest leave, LaCroix stood and placed a hand on Nick's shoulder. The gesture spoke eloquently of the possessiveness he once again claimed as his right. Nick ignored it, his eyes fixed on the figure lingering at the door. Caine's hazel eyes locked with his another moment, then he was truly gone.

"We have much to talk about, Nicholas," LaCroix breathed close to the younger man's ear.

Nick turned to stare into the pale eyes, his expression openly defiant. "We have nothing to talk about, LaCroix. I should imagine you're going to find the next few years rather dull."

"We shall see, dear boy," LaCroix smiled. "We shall both learn a great number of things in the coming years."

The words, so casually issued, had all the promise of terror that LaCroix could create. Nick knew that madness intimately--he no longer feared it.

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They weren't quite nightmares, more like uneasy rides through dark corridors of his mind. Peter reached out, seeking something, never quite knowing what it was that was eluding him. His groping fingers touched only air, a thick, unnaturally heavy curtain of air. There was no one there with him, wherever 'there' was. The realization of loneliness only occurred to him a few times, but when it did, it was a crushing weight of loss that nearly smothered him. Then, the darkness would fade, and the

emotion would dwindle into a floating sensation of nothingness. He sensed his own weakness, but it didn't frighten him, simply stirred tiny ripples of discontent, impatience. Then, even that would vanish.

Detached, as if he were only a spectator--*maybe I am*, the thought formed, then scattered into fragments easily lost--he sometimes felt hands on his body, shifting him, nourishing him, cleaning him, often merely stroking cool caresses over his fevered skin. Thoughts were too difficult to hold, so he merely ignored the touches, or enjoyed them, whichever reaction seemed appropriate without effort on his part.

Once, during the long sleep, he forced his eyes open, breaking through the barrier of sedation that held him, and he saw only two incredibly ancient eyes watching him. He couldn't see the face, only the eyes, encased in wrinkles, encircled by parchment-thin skin and bathed in a glow that blanketed him with a comfort he could barely fathom. He didn't feel the Ancient's fingers as they stroked down his forehead and across his eyelids, once more closing away the vacant brown stare.

It was two days after that before he was able to begin coming out from under the layered sleep that had been imposed on him.

The first blur of sight showed him tiny tongues of flame dancing before him, magically suspended on the currents of air that brushed against his skin. His vision turned to liquid, and the individual glows drooled into pools of yellow light, then cleared so that he could finally see them for what they really were--candles. He was in a room full of candles. That, more than any other sense told him he was at his father's studio.

He blinked against the lingering hold of darkness, and concentrated on focussing his eyes. A form, brown and solid, loomed up beside him, but there was no threat to it. As his sight cleared, he recognized his father, seated crosslegged on the floor beside the cot, watching him with the infinite patience etched into his features that never failed to fascinate Peter.

*"Why are you here?"*

*He was seven years old again, tangled in his sheets, still trembling from the aftermath of haunted dreams, dreams where his mother called to him only to be snatched away on the talons of some terrible bird before his hands could reach hers. Vaguely, he recalled being sick, but it was an elusive memory, no more.*

*There had been no answer from the silent priest pretzeled into a full lotus beside the cot that had been Peter's sick bed for four days of fever and nightmares.*

*Peter tried again, forcing the words past a dry throat, "Have you been here...all this time?"*

*His father smiled, only the faint downturn of his mouth illustrating the weariness in his face. "Yes," he agreed solemnly.*

*"But...you should have rested," the child protested, struggling to a seat in the snarl of bedclothes.*

*Caine shrugged one shoulder, his head canted into a quizzical tilt. He reached out to still the automatic protest of his son and brushed a finger*

*over a forehead now mercifully cool to the touch. The smile deepened and finally entered the hazel depths of his eyes as he registered the lack of fever, and he continued the stroke of his hand, smoothing a caress over the small, bald head. "When you need me, I will be with you," he stated gently. "Always."*

This time, years later, there was no need to ask why his father was here. He was needed; he was here; it really was as simple as that. With a flick of memory, Peter recognized that even death hadn't kept his father from returning. He shook off the thought as too absurd to consider, and tried out his voice, "What...what happened?"

Caine stilled him with a touch of his hand against Peter's chest. "Do not try to remember yet, my son."

"No, Pop, you don't understand," Peter protested, trying in vain to sit up against the gentle, but immovable pressure of the hand against his chest. "There are reports, affidavits, cop stuff that needs to be--"

"Peter." The single word held all the authority of fifteen years previous, father to son, an order that anticipated obedience...and got it. Peter gave up the struggle to rise, and dropped back into the mound of pillows, letting the urgency fade with the effort to steady his breathing. Even the small exertion of trying to sit up had sapped the little strength he had. Caine sat back and waited out the next few minutes, knowing the questions had only been postponed.

As expected, Peter got the next query out with the first easy breath he was able to draw into his lungs. "Where's Nick?"

That answer, at least, was simple, and Caine shrugged. "He has gone."

"Gone? He can't be gone. We have to--"

"He has done what needed to be done, Peter. He has gone home."

"Home?" The word had faintly lost sound to it, as if it were a foreign concept. "But what about..." It took a moment, sorting through the muddy landscape of his memory, but the name came, on a wave of dread and latent fear. "...LaCroix...what about LaCroix?"

"He, too, is gone."

"Gone?" Somewhere under the confusion, Peter realized that he must sound incredibly stupid, but he was beginning to wonder if even simple ideas were too difficult to grasp. Or was the situation just so outlandish that it was beyond his understanding, no matter how hard he tried? "I don't understand."

Again, Caine smiled. "I know. You must rest."

Bewildered, Peter looked around the room. The candles provided the only light, the curtains drawn against day or night--he had no idea which. "How long was I asleep?"

"Four days."

Peter shook his head. "That's impossible. Nobody can sleep for four days."

There was no answer. The silence and bare shrug told Peter that the information was non-negotiable. He had been asleep for four days.

"There are reports that have to be written, filed, put on the computer."

"Nicholas did them."

"All of them?"

"Paul has...covered for you."

The reminder of his captain sparked new concerns. "My job. I can't just disappear for four days, Pop. What--?"

"Paul has done what needs to be done."

There were still lingering pockets of guilt pricking Peter's memory, as if, somehow, he had been a willing victim. After all, he was a trained cop. He wasn't expected to stand still while a lunatic who thought he was a vampire took a bite out of his neck. Even Stephen King wouldn't touch that plot device. *What the hell had Nick told Blaisdell?* "How much does he know?"

"He knows you were injured and you are with me. Nothing more."

Bit by bit, pieces of the past week filtered in through Peter's cobwebbed mind, unsettling memories of the hotel room, horrifying shards of image from the tiny church. He glanced at his wrist, recalling horrible pain and terror. The skin was clear and unbroken, but when he looked up at his father, he read the pain in Caine's eyes, felt a trace of the agony they had shared in that awful night. ...and he saw the guilt.

His own emotions steadied, rolled back into the recesses of his mind and he reached out a still-shaky hand to touch his father's cheek. A single tear welled in Caine's eye, then spilled over. Peter's finger stopped its solitary trail and brushed it away.

"I'm sorry," Peter whispered. "I'm sorry I was the cause of your pain."

Caine shook his head. "He could not have taken you, Peter. Yours is a loving spirit, and..."

"...and you were there."

Caine caught Peter's hand in his own before it could fall away from his face. He enfolded it into his own hands, idly stroking the fingers.

"What about Nick? Is he okay?"

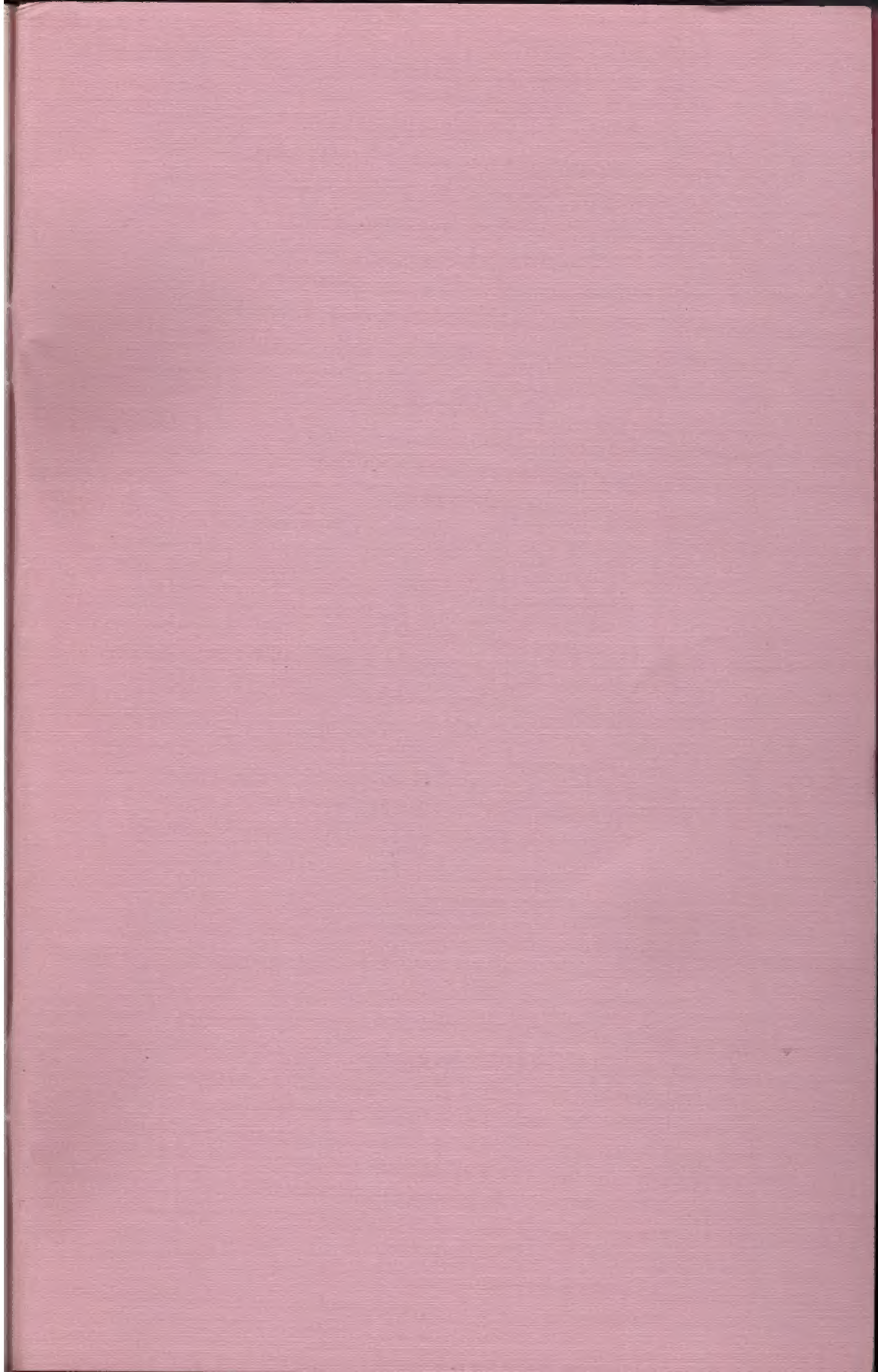
There was a moment's hesitation, but Caine didn't take the easy out of automatic reassurance. "He will work out his own destiny. It is still in his hands. Perhaps that is all he can ask."

Peter sighed in muted frustration at the response, but, incredibly, sleep was pushing at him again. "I can't remember," he said, half protest, half wistful longing.

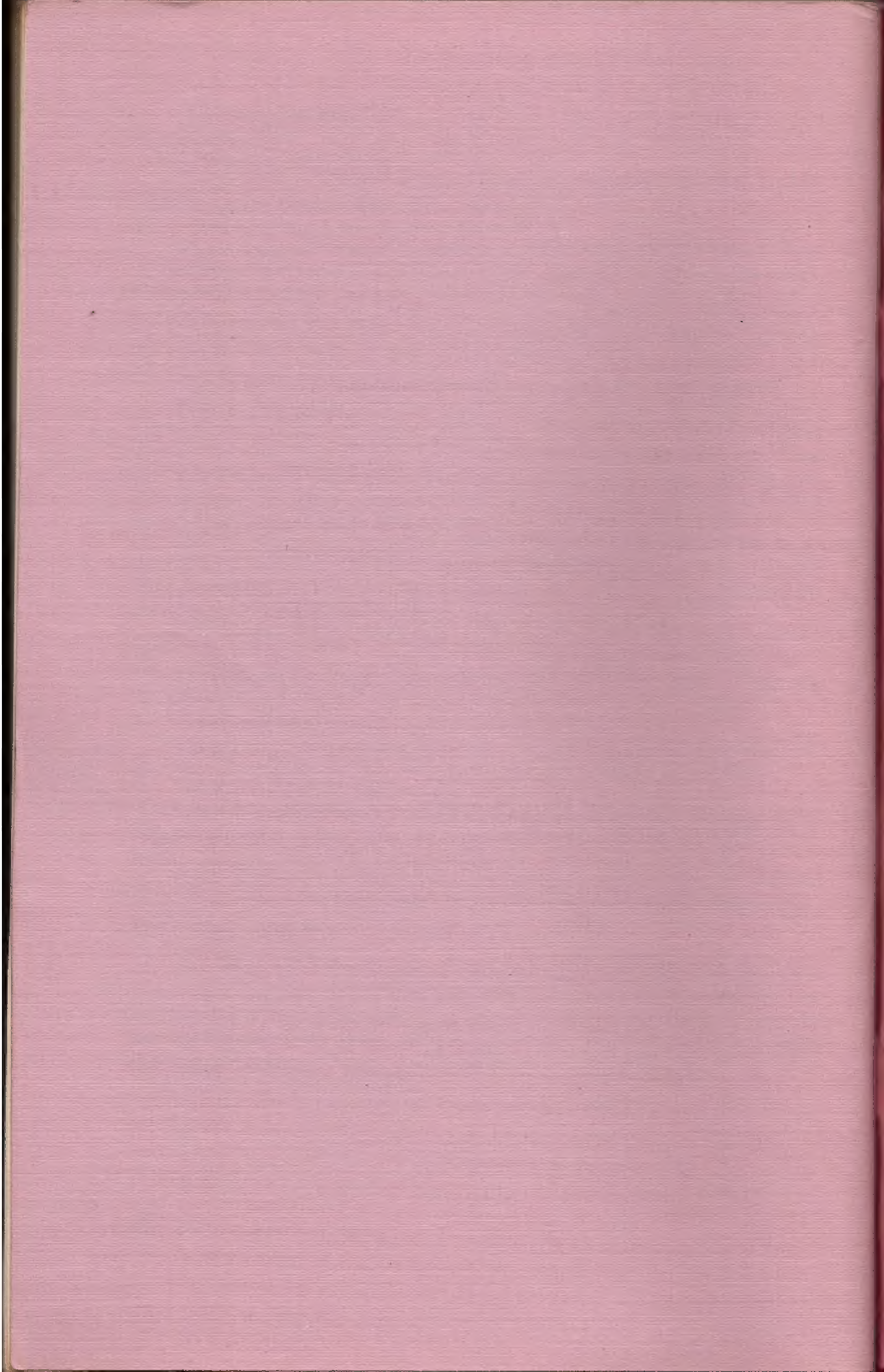
"Let it go, Peter."

The objection was immediate, and useless. It rose to his lips, then died there, as even through his disorientation, Peter realized this was the only way he could deal with this. For once, he was simply going to have to accept something on faith, without question. He tightened his fingers around his father's hand, and, sheltered by the touch, let the web of dreams once again blanket him.

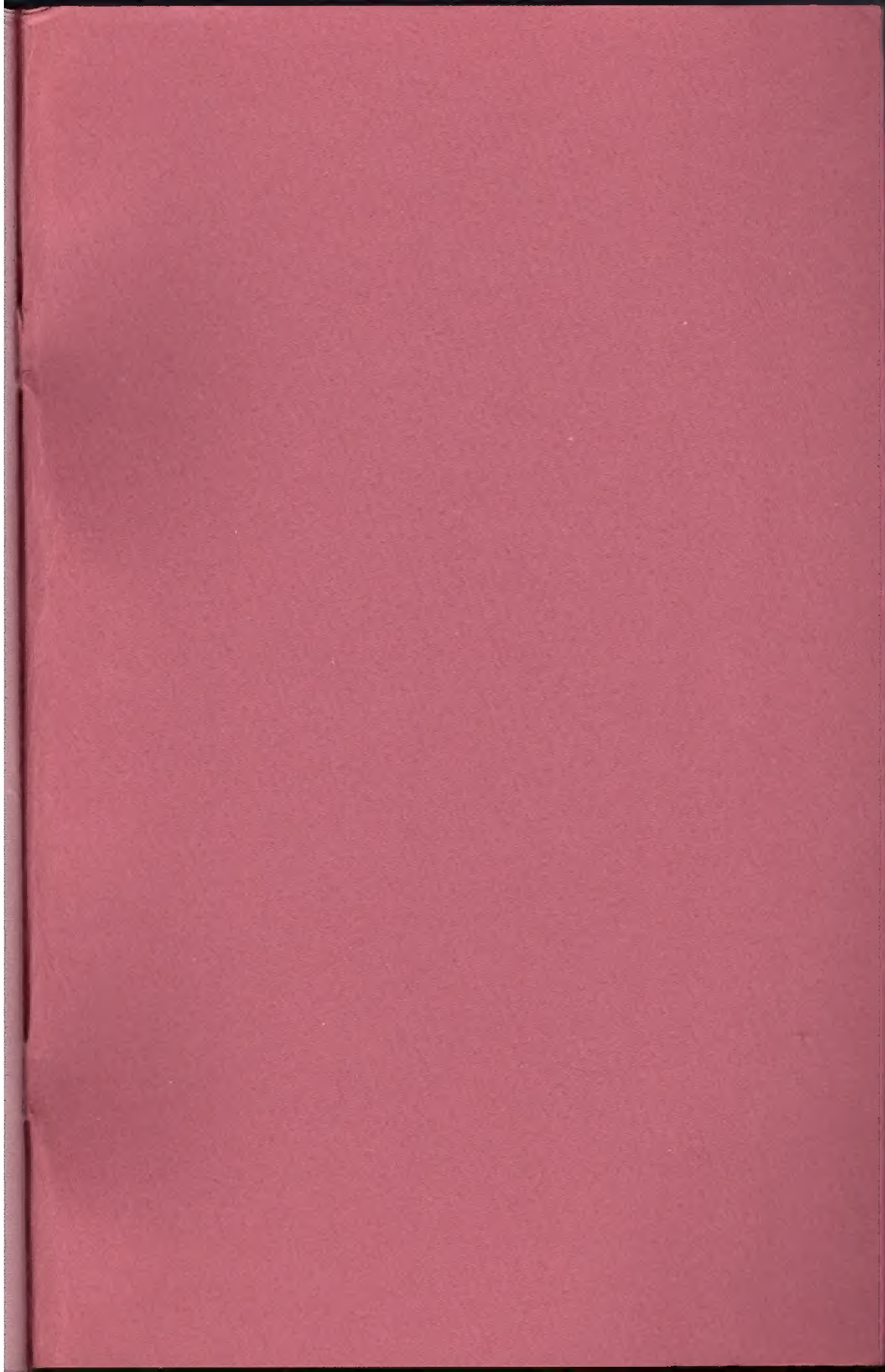
















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